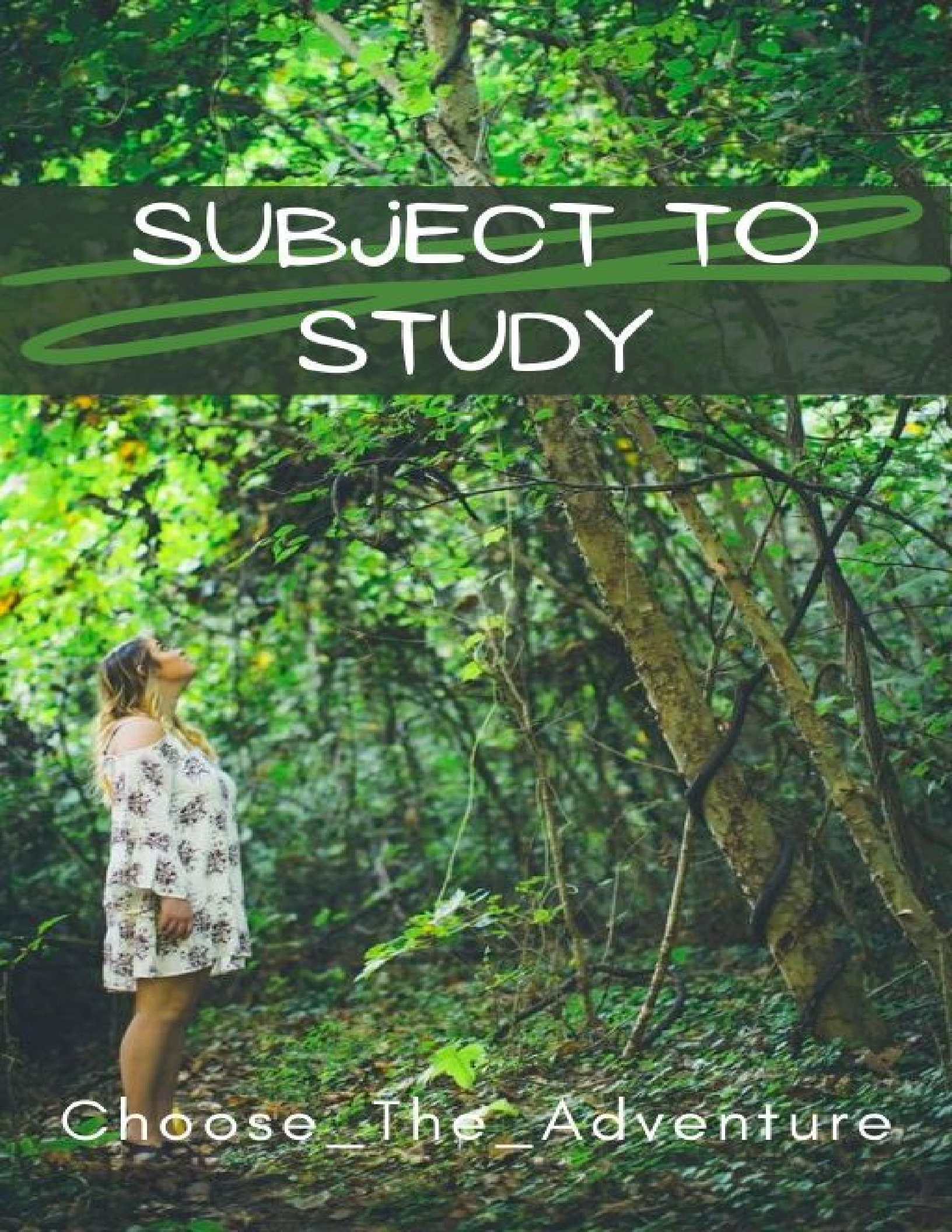
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Chapter 1

My booted feet hit the ground, ducking low as the helicopter blades whirled overhead and moving myself away from the aerodynamic craft. The landing zone was cleared of any trees, far enough away from the research lab that the noise wouldn't startle any of the inhabitants of the island. With the whir of the propeller blades droning lower, the pilot and my co-worker began to unfasten the cargo from the underbelly of the helicopter, a few large bags that were stuffed with clothes, survival gear, supplies, and anything else that we could ever need to stay alive on this remote island.

"All clear!" The pilot called as the last bit of cargo cleared the circumference of the propeller.

"Sounds good!" My co-worker responded, shouldering half of the bags while I gathered my things and settled them on my back, "The other team should be here in an hour or so."

"Thanks for the ride, Jeff!" I gave a high wave as the pilot climbed back into the cockpit, returning the gesture with a small wave as the door closed. Turning to my co-worker with a nod, we began to head towards the jungle where the research lab was with me in the lead and her following behind. The underbrush was thicker than the papers had described, but nothing really seemed out of place as we made the half-hour long hike towards the side of the mountain range.

The island was remote to civilization and, since some new species had been found here, the science field deemed it necessary to set up a research lab to find and catalogue every other creature that could be found. It was like a garden untouched by humanity, and I couldn't wait to get started. Armed with my Masters of Science in Biological Sciences (with a focus on herpetology) and my co-worker's experience and education in botany, we were tasked to cover a lot of ground during our visit, both figuratively and literally.

I glanced behind me to see my co-worker still following, her eyes darting between her feet and the space above her. Her brown hair was tied back into a tight braid, pinned completely down so not even a stray hair stood up. If I saw her in civilian clothes, I would've never pinned her for a botanist.

Erika was a toned woman, a lightweight lifter that loved the outdoors and every outdoor activity known to mankind. Her olive skin was darkened by months of being outside but she wore the tan very well. The dark brown eyes took in every detail they could, a knowing look settling behind her hues as we moved further into the jungle biome.

I couldn't help but smile as I looked ahead of me, seeing the jungle start to thin out a little. When the camouflaged walls of the temporary lab could partially be seen through the trees, a small sense of relief washed over me before reality set back in.

This temporary lab would be my home for the next six months.

"Oh, you're here."

A male voice called out from behind us as we moved towards the lab, turning to see someone in heavy clothes, a backpack slung over his shoulder with a large camera hanging around his neck.

"Did you lose track of time again, Peter?" Erika laughed a little, resting a hand on her hip as the man scurried past us and opened the zippered lab door.

"There was an interesting bloom, and I wanted to get as many details as I could for you," He dipped his head while holding the thick door open for us.

"I appreciate it, but you could've just told me the coordinates and I would've taken care of everything else," She took off her baggage and stretched before looking around the entrance area, "Is Karl deeper in?"

"Yeah, he should be in the specimen lab."

I was left to my own devices, looking around the area and taking in the details as I came across them.

The entrance area was set up like a detox zone, with a zippered flap sealing off the chamber-like room. It was large enough to fit four people, but with three humans and their luggage cramping the space, it wasn't exactly comfortable either. Peter reached for a bagged thermometer and some other kind of detection device, aiming the thermometer at our heads before switching to the other device.

Temperature and possibly some kind of foreign contaminant detection. We were

on an island that wasn't fully documented, and we would be the first ones to catch a foreign disease if there was one laying in wait within the ecosystem.

After he confirmed that we were within an acceptable range of health, he opened the inner flap and we were able to put our luggage in the living quarters of the lab. The room had a few cots available besides the two that had luggage already on them, so I put my bags on one of the canvas beds near the corner, giving myself a small nod in satisfaction.

I was the newest person on the team, and I didn't want to step on any toes while I was here. Erika had told me earlier that this was her third go-around, and was insistent that I'd be okay, commenting that I was chosen from only a few people that applied to this expedition.

"Let's see what they found this time..." Erika muttered to herself as she left the room, drawing my attention slightly. She seemed to kick into a different mindset when she had set foot inside the lab, which was fine with me. This was our job, not a vacation from civilization.

"There'll be a debriefing in a few minutes, so find your way towards the office," I heard Peter call out from outside the room as he walked by. I gave a verbal confirmation before ducking out of the room to explore the lab a little bit.

The sleeping room was situated near the kitchen and office, and finding the medical room was easy enough. It felt more like a miniature hospital than a science lab, but one needed that when away from society. As I went from room to room, I came across the specimen lab. It had a detox area just like the lab entrance, and I could see rows of shelves beyond the semi-transparent plastic.

I felt a familiar itch on my jawline. I rubbed my hand against it, but I couldn't hide the excitement that I felt. That itch always started when I was ready to work, a tell-tale sign that I couldn't wait to begin recording the fauna of the island.

"Are you ready...?" I heard Peter leave the question hanging, seeing him walk from an area beyond the specimen lab to the office.

"(Y/n) (L/n)," I filled in the blank as I followed him, my mind screaming to study

something

.

"Right. It'll be quick, so you'll be able to start soon," He had a nervous smile as we entered the office. Erika and another man were already there, talking to each other in hushed whispers that went silent when we arrived.

"You're the new girl, huh?" The male turned to me, his studious eyes never leaving my colored hues.

"(Y/n). I promise I won't trash up the place while you're gone," I tried to offer a little joke, but it didn't seem to land. The others continued without acknowledging what I said.

"As I was saying earlier, Erika, there's a bloom that started happening in the last few hours. I'm not sure how long it'll last," Peter handed her a sizable folder that was full of notes and pictures.

"I'll keep an eye on it," She nodded while looking through the file.

"(Y/n), the local fauna do seem to be a larger size than their land-locked cousins," I had guessed that the second guy was Karl as he came over to me, holding out a USB drive with 'fauna data' scrawled on it, "I haven't come across anything particularly dangerous to humans yet, but that's not saying we're completely safe from them if they do make an appearance."

"Okay, I'll be careful."

The rest of the debriefing was pretty standard. The food stores were running a little low, but Erika and I had brought enough to last our entire stint here. The river was deemed safe for us to drink from after extensive testing, so we had a reliable water source nearby should our rainwater filtering system stop working. Everything else could be taken care of by our survival gear.

When the guys left for the helicopter, I made my way towards my luggage and began to unpack my tools of trade: a weatherproof notebook, a pencil, a no-run pen, and my GPS tracker. Logging in the lab coordinates as a 'home' location, I readied myself to wander around the immediate vicinity of the lab, knowing I only had a few hours of good daylight left.

"Heading out?" Erika called from the kitchen as I walked past, catching my attention as she resupplied the lab with the food and drinks we brought on the trip.

"Yeah, but only for a little bit. I've got the GPS active with this as 'HOME', so I'm not going to get lost," I replied before opening the inner flap of the front entrance.

"All right, see you when you get back. I'm gonna get this place ready for us."

Ensuring that the flap was closed behind me, I stepped outside and took a deep breath. The air was thicker than it was when we were walking up here, the humidity level feeling heavier than before. It must've been getting ready to rain. The thick tree canopy blocked most of the sky from the lab, but I could still see some sky blue color through the dark green foliage.

I started with the immediate perimeter around the lab, writing down the markings I saw and scratching some rough drafts of various tracks I saw. There were four-legged marks, and some two-legged patterns that leaned towards the avian side. I wound my way in a spiral around the lab, going out just a little bit further before stumbling onto a pattern that I didn't recognize.

Catching my footing, I looked down more closely to see that I

did

recognize it but not at its size. Karl's warning echoed in my head as I jotted down some notes, the movement looking more like a serpent as I sketched out the width and smeared scale marks.

The curves of the trail pushed up dirt and mud, the width of the mark measuring almost forty-five to fifty centimeters.

I paused, looking at my mental measurements again.

Forty-five to fifty centimeters?!

That was just a bit longer than the average shoulder width. How could something as wide as a human not be documented? 'Not completely safe from the large fauna' indeed...

My brain kicked into high gear as I calculated how large this snake could be. With its presumed width, it could swallow a white-tailed doe whole without much fuss, and it could

definitely

swallow a human effortlessly. The depth of the trail was startling; I could put my hand straight down the side without touching the bottom. With the numbers starting to not make sense in my head, I wrote down the GPS coordinates before doubling back towards the lab, yelling at Erika to throw me the laser distance measurer. I closed the outer door before hearing a soft

'thud' against the thick fabric, waiting to hear Erika close the inner flap to grab the communal tool.

Heading back to the track coordinates, I erased my mental measurements and re-confirmed every check I made twice over. The read-back was the same each time.

Forty-eight centimeters wide, and twenty-three centimeters at its deepest point.

This snake was a monster and probably weighed close to 400 pounds, larger than a reticulated python and probably closer to a green anaconda. Glancing around the area, it didn't appear to be wet enough for an anaconda to thrive in, but nature had a funny way of providing odd survival tactics to creatures outside their normal habitat.

The trail led further west into the jungle and, as much as I wanted to follow it to see what the creature was, the sun had started to dip towards the horizon. Groaning as my knees protested against the movement, I stood up while gathering my notes and tools, realizing that I had nearly churned out a few pages of sketches and hypotheses based on the depth and width of the track alone. I'd have to be careful so I didn't run out of pages before the six months were up, knowing that I tended to get excited about herpetology.

Taking a breath to calm down from my whirlwind thinking, I turned back towards the tent and carefully made my way through, looking for anything that had changed while I was on the field. Nothing caught my eye as something different or new, which was fine after a discovery right after my arrival.

I couldn't shake the feeling that this stay would change everything.

Chapter 2

The next morning was a rush to gather more accurate tools, clipping them to my mesh vest for the expedition I had planned for the day. Eating a granola bar and a protein drink, I went through the procedures for leaving the lab without rushing, calmly leaving towards the coordinates of yesternight's find. My familiar backpack was slung over my right shoulder, stuffed with a brand new field journal, my hasty notes from yesterday, and emergency rations as well as survival tools just in case the GPS unit decided to fail me. The handheld GPS was fully charged and linked to the home system in the lab, letting Erika know where my last known location was should the connection be terminated.

I felt an excited rumble tickle the back of my throat, swallowing an energetic scream as I carefully walked towards the abnormally large snake trail. On the outside I knew that I looked calm and collected, but the hyperactive child on the inside couldn't stand still as my feet brought me closer to the coordinates.

The ferns parted as I walked through them, exposing the snake trail to the light. The dirt had hardened through the night, no longer soft and malleable so anything could've changed the original dimensions of the track. Slipping the backpack off my shoulders, I opened the larger pocket to dig out four wooden stakes and a roll of twine rope, quickly measuring out the part I had worked with last night and sectioning it off into more manageable pieces. Using the movement of the track, I determined that the snake had come from the river nearby and headed deeper into the jungle, a large chunk of it still unmapped by the team.

Tucking some hair behind my ear, I shoved the side of the pencil in my mouth before reaching into the backpack and pulling out the field journal. I wouldn't give this snake a name until I confirmed that it was a new species, but I wrote down a few rough drafts of the scientific names. Just because I found the species doesn't mean that I wanted it named after myself.

The next time I checked my watch, it was well after two o'clock in the afternoon. I knew that I could get lost in my work, but it was still surprising to see how much progress I've made during that time. Using the hardened dirt to my advantage, I had collected a small surface sample of the track, estimating a more accurate weight of the snake, as well as the width, length, and type of snake, and had found a small yellow scale stuck on some dried snakeskin. I had grown slightly worried for the creature when I saw the scale, but realized that it was damaged and had just come off with the shed, instead of being pulled off like I originally thought.

Storing all of the samples I collected in individual vials and containers, I packed everything up into the backpack and chewed on a protein bar for lunch, turning my attention towards the deeper jungle. It would be a dumb move to just follow the track into the uncharted area, but the pull of finding this creature was strong.

With a resigned sigh, I turned away from the lush jungle and went instead to the river near the lab, where this creature had come from. Partially using the track as a guide, it took almost fifteen minutes to make it to the slow-moving river, neatly bisecting the piece of land it curled around. The river stemmed from a freshwater spring high on the mountain and joined with many other streams until the water gathered in size and levelled out on the flatlands, deep enough to swim in and slow enough to be called a 'lazy river' in an amusement park.

The water was clear enough to see the seaweed bed waving with the current along the bottom, but still offered enough hiding places for creatures to stay safe from predatory eyes. Setting my backpack down far from the bank, I sat next to it and rested against a sturdy tree after checking for hidden dangers. I pulled out my field journal to go over my notes again, to ensure that the facts were fresh in my mind.

The yellow scale came from closer to the tail, possibly one of the ventral scales that had fallen off from the shedding. As to what snake it originated from, I only had a few guesses with the size that I was working with.

A reticulated python could grow to be that large if it was given the appropriate amount of food, and there were plenty of smaller animals that it

could consume without much fuss. It wouldn't surprise me if there were a few on the island, since they were semi-aquatic and preferred wetlands as their habitat.

A Burmese python could also fatten itself up to that size with the same conditions as the reticulated python, and operated under nearly the same rules as a reticulated python.

A green anaconda was my last guess, but that was much less likely due to the scale coloring. It was still an option, but I wasn't going to consider it until I had more evidence.

Resting the back of my head on the tree, I closed my eyes for a moment with a sigh before slowly opening them to stare at the thick canopy above me. The part of the job that I hated the most was when I had to wait to get more clues about an animal. I wanted to know more about it, to study it from afar and get more behavioural clues before attempting to study it from a closer distance if the creature was deemed non-aggressive.

A shift of light caught my eye on a tree limb high above me.

Narrowing my eyes to try and gather more detail, I realized with a chill that the tree limb held a thick coil of snake. I froze up as the yellow spattering of color along the white scales perfectly matched my memory of the yellow scale nestled in my backpack, the colors running through my head as I tried to remember the name of the color morph I was looking at.

The coil seemed to compress, a sign of an exhale from the snake, before shifting a little more. The coil itself was about eight meters above me, the thickness not telling me which part of the snake it was. It could be close to the head or tail, or it could even be its midsection.

I watched with held breath as the coil moved away from eyesight, somehow hiding itself behind the tree before I could grab any other detail about it.

The patterns on the scales were reminiscent of a reticulated python, but I wouldn't know for sure until I saw the shape of its head. Slowly getting up without making much of a sound, I put the field journal safely back in my

bag before walking around the tree's trunk and looking up, trying to see if I was able to watch the snake. Confusion settled in my mind as I found myself under the original limb again without seeing anything in the boughes above me.

Had the snake managed to sneak away?

The itch along my jawline emerged with a vengeance, my hand subconsciously reaching up to rub it as I tried to think of the equipment we had on hand in the lab for climbing trees. The pulleys and harnesses were already here, but the climbing spikes were supposed to be coming in with the next rotation since both members were to document the upper canopies of the jungle.

I bit my lower lip in frustration.

I couldn't follow the snake up into the trees, and that meant an annoying waiting game to see when it'll descend next. I couldn't force the snake down or change its behavior in any way to ruin the research, so that meant that I'd have to stake out the area and watch.

Gripping my backpack straps, I slung the bag over my right shoulder before I heard various items fall out from it, scattering across the ground and even something splashing into the river. With a gasp, I turned on my heel to see that all of the pockets had been opened and spewed out everything that wasn't in an interior pocket, including my notes.

I dropped the backpack and ran for the field journal that had been flung into the river, crying out in shock as I stepped into the water, ripping the journal from the surface before the papers could soak up any more moisture and shaking it in hopes that the documented notes could be saved. Ignoring the squelching in my boots, I retreated back to the shore and knelt along the shoreline, gingerly opening up the field journal to see that the pencil marks I had made were mostly rubbed off. The pen markings had stayed, but the pencil writing contained the details of measurements, how I had come to those conclusions, and anything that I didn't want to be considered 'officially permanent'.

Hours of my work were erased in a matter of seconds, based on a decision that I had made to not write everything in pen.

Lesson learned

, I clenched my jaw tightly as I berated myself mentally. Leaving the wet field journal next to the backpack, I gathered everything else that had fallen out, mentally taking inventory and ensuring that everything was still there. Huffing in frustration, I zipped the pockets up once again, angry that I hadn't done that beforehand.

My hand paused as I closed the largest pocket.

No, I only opened the part containing the field journal...why was my

entire

backpack unzipped?

Erika was the only other person on this island, but I didn't take her for a vicious prankster.

Blinking a few times to clear my thoughts, I stood up in my sopping wet boots and brought out the spool of twine from my backpack, tying the loose end to the hand loop and walking around the truck of the tree with the spool at the same pace when I was looking for the snake. Counting the seconds in my head, I came full circle to the backpack and lined up the twine in my hand with the twine on my bag. Swiftly pulling out the measuring tape, I had walked around the twenty-seven meter circumference in almost a minute.

It was long enough for any person to ransack through my bag.

Rolling up the twine and putting it away again, I turned my attention to the field journal, lifting it gently and sitting down with my backpack between my legs in a protective stance. The wet pages made it difficult to separate them without tearing the paper, and I eventually gave up before wrapping it in my hand towel and carefully placing it in the backpack again.

What a way to start the expedition...

The intrusive thought wormed its way through my head as I closed my eyes, partially in frustration and partially in fatigue. I had to remain patient if I wanted to see success, but this kind of bad start would get most field researchers down.

I slightly flinched as I felt something flicker over my face, something dancing across my skin before pulling away quickly. Some bark snapped from high up in the tree, something hard crawling across it as I heard whatever it was shift its movement.

Maybe it was the snake again...? Hopefully it came back.

I slowly opened my eyes and stared at the face staring back at me from above.

It was clearly a humanoid face, but the eyes were completely orange with black slits that were narrowed, slightly moving as I stared at it. There were yellow and white scales along its back, merging with the long tail that was clinging to the tree like a lifeline. What threw me for a loop were the humanoid arms reaching out to me from either side.

Each arm looked like my own, with functioning digits and wrists, bendable elbows and rotating shoulders, and I couldn't help but flinch away from the tree as an index finger brushed across my left cheek. The eyes widened a little before something slid out from between its lips, darting towards me in lazy waves before disappearing back into its mouth.

My heart pounded against my chest, the Frankenstein's monster of a creature fully splayed out in front of me as I could only come up with one word: naga.

A fantastical hybridization of a human and a snake that was only found in legend and myth...and I had one staring at me like I was something new, making some dark humorous part of me ask who was studying whom. My brain screamed that it was impossible for a naga to exist, that their offered biology made it an offense to science to even exist.

But here was one right in front of my eyes, and I couldn't shake the feeling that this massive creature was the one who made the trail. The body size visually fit my measurements, and the color of the scales matched the same shade of the yellow scale in my backpack.

The naga's white and yellow hair fell in front of its eyes as it lowered itself down the tree and approached me, the muscular coils not touching my backpack. I kept moving away from it until my hand plunged into the river behind me, stopping my movement and making me look behind to see that I had a choice of diving into the river to escape or running along the unstable mud banks.

Its humanoid mouth opened partially, the snake-like tongue flicking in and out again as it stopped in front of me. I could see the bumps along its gumline, hiding the curved teeth that I knew all snakes had, and I took in a breath as the mouth opened a little wider.

"You smell different."

Chapter 3

"You smell different."

I watched as the lips formed the vowels, the mythical naga parting its humanoid jaws to speak to me. The guttural words sounded like normal human speech, the English language flowing through the air without a sense of struggle.

"You...can talk..." The words fell from my mouth as my mind tried to register that I was the one who said them.

"Yeah!" Its lips spread wide in a smile that would've looked normal on a human, its eyes partially closing in response. The naga inched towards me, its hand gripping the ankle of my right boot and applying an immense pressure onto it as it crawled forward. I cried out in pain as I felt my ankle shift to an odd angle, the naga immediately releasing its grip and leaning close to smell the coarse leather of the boot.

I swallowed a gasp as I felt my body suddenly shift towards the naga, my right leg sticking up in the air as it was held aloft. My head hit some of the rocks on the bank before my entire body was lifted into the air, its free hand poking and prodding at everything hanging off my body.

"Your skin is like the others," The naga commented as I was upside down, my hair and arms dangling as I was at the mercy of this powerful creature, "But you smell different from them."

"The others...did they leave yesterday...?" I couldn't shake the feeling that the naga was just as curious as I was, taking a chance to mentally take notes of its appearance.

"Mhmm," It hummed in response. I looked as closely as I could at the waistline, seeing the scales fade into human-like skin below where a belly button would be. The patterns of the scales identified the naga as a reticulated python and the coloring marked it as albino. I was turned around

and felt it rub its hand along my back, its fingers marking where my spine was before I felt one tuck underneath my belt.

"Ah! Please, not there!" I reached around and pressed both of my hands where its finger was trying to go, sealing off my lower back and tailbone.

"You don't have a tail," It stated as I was flipped rightside up again, one of its hands gripping the back of my mesh vest and pulling up, "And your skin isn't attached to your body!"

Fighting against the naga wasn't an option. A normal reticulated python could kill a man at a full-grown size, and this naga was nearly three-to-four times as large as that. I'd be crushed with a single flex of its coils if I seemed like a threat...so I hung limply from its hands, letting myself flop around like a doll while it sated its curiosity.

"No...the 'skin' you're talking about is actually called 'clothing'. It's not attached to our actual skin," I offered before I felt a yank near my chest, realizing that the naga had grabbed the tucked-in shirt and lifted

upwards

. I clamped my arms around my chest and kept the shirt and vest from being lifted all the way off, but my exposed belly seemed to intrigue the naga more than figuring out why I reacted.

Its hand released my shirt and rubbed along the skin of my abdomen, tracing every line and stretch mark it found like it was studying a map for hidden treasure. I shuddered as its cold finger dragged itself along my sides, biting my lip to stop from bursting out in laughter, letting the creature examine me.

"Your skin kinda looks like mine," It brought me closer to its body, pressing me against its own stomach as it looked down to see if our skin tones matched. Its skin was cold, feeling like a slightly chilled ice pack before I felt a rumble rise in its chest. The rumble rose to its throat that tightened into a light hiss as I felt its arms wrap around me, pressing me even tighter

against its body as my vision shifted to the left, feeling a thick coil wrap around my upper legs and waist.

I stifled a pitiful whine.

This was how I was going to die...!

"You're so warm, too..." Its voice sounded like the naga was about to fall asleep, "Did you just sun yourself...?"

I found myself wrapped in more coils as the naga lounged next to the tree, pinning me close to it as it tried to sap my body heat. It wasn't uncomfortably tight, but a wrong move on the naga's part could cause my lungs to collapse.

"No...I produce my own heat," The fact that snakes were ectothermic was probably my only saving grace right now, "Do I really feel

that

warm to you?"

"You're like a movable hot spring..." It hummed as it shifted its arms underneath its own coils, slipping under the back of my shirt as it tried to get itself as close to me as possible, "If I had known that you were this warm, I would've picked you up yesterday..."

My face paled as I thought back to my discovery of the snake trail, never thinking to look above me as the possibility of a new creature kept me too focused on the ground. The proximity of the lab was close enough that Erika had a chance to see the naga, as well...

and we were still close enough for her to see the naga!

The thought made me look towards my backpack, the handheld GPS still attached to the front panel as the screen pulsed with low activity. She hadn't tried to ping my location yet, but I couldn't be sure that Erika wasn't paying attention to my stationary position.

"Your heartbeat picked up. Are you okay?" The naga brought my attention back to it, making me tense up at the proximity of our faces. Its tongue flicked out and danced across my face again, the two tines spreading wide before it slipped back into the mouth.

"Kinda? I can't really stay here, since my co-worker may be wondering where I am," I tried to motion with my head that I needed to leave.

"I'll bring you home," The wide smile appeared again, and I had a sinking feeling that it meant its

own

home, not the lab.

"As much as I'd love to see your lair, I actually have a lot of work to do at my own home. So..." I gave a pointed look at the coils around me.

"You

don't

want to stay with me...?" The tone took on a somber key, as if I had just told a child that I was taking away his favorite toy.

"Not right now, no. But, if you let me go back to my home, I'll come back here tomorrow, okay?" I felt its arms slide out from underneath my shirt.

"...okay!" The naga completely released its hold on me and lowered me to the ground, letting go when I was standing on my own two feet. It unwound its tail from its anchor point and let me walk towards my backpack, "What time do we meet again...?"

"How about when the sun is high in the sky?" I pointed towards where the sun would be just before noon. The naga nodded before a look of surprise crossed its features.

"My name is Jyushi!" It called out as I slung my backpack over my shoulder again, bending down to gently pick up the wet journal.

"I'm (y/n), and I'll see you tomorrow, Jyushi."

Chapter 4

I had dressed lighter than yesterday, a shirt made out of thinner material underneath my mesh vest and cargo shorts instead of the usual pants. I had applied bug spray to keep any insect from feeding off of me, but I was certain that Jyushi's scales had thoroughly rubbed that barrier off a long time ago.

Once again, my body was wrapped by his thick coils, much looser than yesterday but still keeping me close enough for him to feel my body warmth. I had my dried field journal propped on the coil resting in front of me, and had been busy sketching what he described as his clutchmates.

There were six nagas on the island in total, but each clutchmate he mentioned seemed to be a completely different species of snake. Jyushi didn't go into much physical description detail, but I was able to pull from memory the closest species that he was willing to describe.

Oso was described as one of the lazier 'brothers' that Jyushi had, sleeping and lounging during the daytime. He didn't seem to become very active until the evening, my mind labelling him as nocturnal and briefly sketching a tail pattern in the field journal. Jyushi had said that the end of his tail was completely red and partially faded into the black scales of his body.

Kara was more active during the daytime, but had stayed far away from where the previous teams had mapped out and wouldn't approach the temporary lab. The physical description was difficult to draw out, but the tail pattern blended into the main part of the body and marked him as a monocolored naga. There may have been a different color for the ventral scales, but the question went unanswered as Jyushi continued talking.

The third clutchmate Jyushi described was called Choro, a naga with a solid green-scaled body and tail. Choro was described as timid despite having bouts of anger when his shedding went wrong, and it went wrong almost every time due to stress from the first two clutchmates harassing him.

The fourth naga was named Ichi, and he often hung around Jyushi when he wasn't off on his own. The coloration of Ichi's scales fascinated me, hearing Jyushi call them a 'pale purple' with darker patches all along his back. There were only a few naturally occurring purple snakes, so I was intrigued to see what kind of naga Ichi was.

The last brother, or clutchmate, was called Todo. As Jyushi described what Todo looked like, I was stunned. The last naga had

pink

scales...not just shaded pink or a faint color that could be called 'pink', but a naturally occurring bright pink that he was born with. Jyushi didn't know much about Todo, since none of the brothers really stayed together.

Jyushi's arm shifted underneath my shirt as his hand traced along my back again, finding the divet of my spine under my skin and rubbing along the vertebrates. I wasn't worried about his hand wandering any further down, not with the ground rule we both had agreed to: neither party could explore the other without express permission.

My hunch about Jyushi being curious about me was pretty dead-on, as the first thirty minutes of us meeting again after noon were spent with him continuing his inspection from yesterday, and I kept my hands to myself while pouring over every visual detail I could see.

While Jyushi's humanoid half was completely devoid of scales, I did notice faint traces of the albino reticulated python pattern spread over his skin. Wherever hair sprouted on him, it took on the color of the scales that were underneath it. It explained why his hair was patterned just like his lower body.

The sun was high in the sky, its light filtered through the thick canopy before falling onto our skin and scales. Jyushi had pulled me onto a low hanging branch and wrapped his tail around it as an anchor point before laying me flat against him. I could feel his body begin to warm up from both the sunlight and my body heat, but Jyushi seemed to sink deeper into a drowsy state instead of a more active state like normal snakes would. The

act made me wonder if he was more active during the nighttime, just 'storing' energy during the day before his internal clock kicked in and gave him more drive.

"You've been writing a lot of things down," Jyushi's voice rumbled against my chest, his head partially tilting down to see whatever I've been doing in the field journal. Scribbles of naga in various poses were dotting the entire page, almost looking like an art study book rather than a scientific field journal. With no holotype or first specimen to work from, I was flying blind in this new world.

"I find you and your clutchmates interesting," I turned over the page and began writing notes about the naga flexibility based on what I've seen Jyushi do, "In fact, I find most wildlife interesting, but snakes are my forte."

"Four-tay?"

"A strong point. Something that someone is really passionate about studying or doing," I began transcribing the multitude of theories that were floating around in my head, "One of your forte's would be climbing trees."

"I do like doing that a lot," Jyushi nodded before laying his head back down, seemingly satisfied with my answer. I felt one of his coils adjust along my leg, feeling the muscles ripple underneath the scales as it widened to grip more of the branch underneath us.

"(Y/n)?"

Both Jyushi and I froze, Erika's familiar voice calling out from down below. I heard Jyushi sharply exhale, a whisper of a hiss escaping through his parted fangs and nostrils. Pulling myself out from his tightening coils, I tried to motion for him to be silent as I scrambled towards one of the nearby branches. Jyushi looked partially confused as I gripped my field journal tightly, mentally yelling at myself that I should've checked in with her earlier.

I exhaled through my teeth, the air passing through in a shushing sound and catching her attention. She looked up towards me and followed the finger I

was pointing towards Jyushi. He had tucked away behind the tree, hiding his humanoid torso and head to just leave his python tail exposed to her vision. Erika's eyes widened before nodding in acknowledgement, slowly raising an arm and motioning for me to come down. Tucking my field journal underneath my arm, I slowly climbed down from the branch, acting like I didn't want to disturb the 'large snake'.

"Nice find, (y/n)," Erika whispered as I got closer.

"What did you need me for?" I gave a nod.

"The motion cameras need collecting on the far side of the island, and I was about to head that way. Are you able to come with, or would you like more time with that retic?" She pointed towards the retreating tail of Jyushi.

"I've got enough notes for now," Motioning towards the warped field journal with my head, I looked back at her, "Just let me get geared up, and I'll be good to head out with you."

With a nod of confirmation, we headed back towards the lab and went through the entry process. I left to set my field journal with my personal belongings before gearing up for the deeper jungle, swapping the cargo shorts for heavy pants that were thick enough to repel insects that wanted to feed on me. The short sleeve shirt was exchanged for a long-sleeve shirt, the material designed to wick away sweat. Slipping my mesh vest back on, I grabbed the lab's camera and dialed in my GPS again, ensuring that I could find my way back if I ever became lost.

"I'm happy that you found that snake," Erika gave me a smile before opening the outer door of the lab, the inner flap shut tight behind us, "I know what it feels like when you try to track down something that keeps avoiding you."

"I'm glad, too. Karl was right with what he said; I never thought I'd see a reticulated python grow to be that size back State-side."

"How big was it?" She dug out her GPS locator device and started to follow the signal for the trail cameras.

"The track I had found put it around forty-eight centimeters, but I couldn't get a rid on its actual length since I couldn't disturb it," I pushed aside a branch as we walked single file, avoiding the spiderwebs and following the faint footpath. It wasn't a lie, since I hadn't been able to fully measure out Jyushi's length. I could safely guess that he was way past six meters, though.

"That's pretty large! Don't they normally get to about thirty-two centimeters?" She glanced back at me before looking back down at her tracker.

"Normally, yeah. That's why I didn't want to try messing with it."

Pushing past the last bit of overgrowth, Erika and I found ourselves standing in a near oasis. The walk was definitely draining, almost an hour from the lab, but the view was spectacular.

The river downstream definitely started here, a small creek that was fed from a spring close by, twisting around the moss-covered rocks and gathering speed as it rolled downhill. The water itself seemed to be just as clear as it was closer to the lab, revealing the small colorful fish that darted around within.

Letting Erika grab what she needed from the trail cameras positioned around the area, I looked up towards the tree canopy, shading my eyes from the sunlight as I tried to catch a glimpse of anything that decided to watch us. After a few moments of fruitless staring, I sighed and looked back towards Erika, seeing her swap out the batteries and SD memory cards for fresh ones.

"How long will that last us?"

"A few days. There's a chart back in the lab with dates of when everything gets switched out," She closed the carrying case and clipped it back to her vest, looking around before making a satisfied sound as she squatted down

in front of a thick bush, "So, this is where it is...he put it at the wrong coordinates."

"New growth maybe?" I leaned around to see what she was looking at, something teal underneath the deep green catching my eye. She turned towards me as she lifted up the first layer of leaves, revealing a coiled snake with its mouth open as it launched from the tightly formed striking position, "Erika!"

She dropped the branch she was lifting and jumped backwards, moving out of range of the snake's mouth as her hand pulled back just as fast as its maw. Stringing a few choice words together, she scrambled back and behind me, bringing her hand up for a close examination.

"The fuck was that?"

"Well, it definitely wasn't a blue racer, if that's what you're asking," I scooted forward a little, grabbing a lengthy stick and using it to lift up the branch again. The same teal snake stared at me, opening its mouth again to show off the pink color inside. I could see the fangs adjust as the threat turned into a yawn, the snake closing its mouth but I still felt the threat of another bite present. The brilliant teal color of its scales made it stand out against the bush we had caught it in, probably coming down from the trees to drink from the spring.

I slowly lowered the branch down and discarded the stick, helping Erika stand back up.

"Next time you're out here, be more cautious. I don't think it nests near here, but it never hurts to be careful."

"Could you tell what it was?" She rubbed her palm against her shirt, the previous nervousness gone as she found out that she wasn't bitten.

"Blue insularis pit viper. They're normally found in Indonesia, but I guess a few made their way here a while ago," I raised a finger to my jawline. We were near the middle of nowhere where the closest mainland was Australia. How did an arboreal snake get to this island? My guess was that found its

way here when the water levels were lower, possibly, cut off from when the ocean rose.

"It's not gonna hunt me, is it?" Erika couldn't hide the fear in her voice. I'd be scared, too, if a venomous snake lashed out when I wasn't paying attention.

"

You

scared

it

. You're also way too big for it to eat, so you're not even close to being on the menu," I shook my head, reminded of the common fear that humans had towards reptiles.

Erika and I trudged back to the lab in silence, me wishing I had brought something to sketch it out with, and Erika probably dealing with her own internal musings. With the sun setting, we staggered into the lab and washed off the day, laying on our respective bunks.

I didn't notice my naga field journal was missing until the next evening.

Chapter 5

I had searched everywhere for the missing field journal throughout the week, tearing through my bags and looking all over my desk, checking and rechecking every single place that I had already looked through. Erika gave a negative answer when I had asked her if she'd seen it or moved it somewhere without my knowledge, leaving me be to continue her own studies while I had to move on and do some work on the island. As fascinating as Jyushi and his clutchmates were, I knew that they weren't the only new species on the island.

Using the data that Karl had given me on the USB drive, I was able to do further research on the species that he found, dividing some of them into subspecies when I found enough variance between the groupings. Adding another handful of reptiles and insects to the ever-growing list, I began taking along a camera on the expeditions to document the new finds on the spot.

After silently taking a picture of a new kind of praying mantis, I heard the crunch of a stick snapping underneath a hefty weight, turning my ear towards the sound and freezing as I started to hear male voices. Shoving the camera into my bag, I quickly shouldered it and made my way towards the noise.

There shouldn't have been any other humans on the island besides Erika and myself.

A blade sang through the air before biting into some branches and vines that seemed to offend the intruders, cutting through the greenery with ease. I crouched by one of the nearby trees, my brown outfit helping me blend in a little as I saw two men walk by, about six or so feet from me.

They were each armed with a machete, what looked to be a hunting rifle and a sidearm pistol, and geared up like they were taking a safari trip.

Poachers.

I narrowed my eyes in anger before catching a familiar book in one of their hands. The previously water-logged papers wouldn't have been hard to replicate, but my handwriting on the cover gave it away instantly.

My naga field journal.

They were hunting for Jyushi and his clutchmates.

"Excuse me, what are you gentlemen doing here?" I called out, stepping out from behind them with a hand resting on my radio. They both jumped and turned towards me, one removing the rifle from his shoulder and aiming it at me while the other brandished his machete.

"Oh!" The man with the rifle glanced down at my outfit, his eyes trying to find some kind of company name, "You were out for an awfully long time, so dispatch sent us to come find you."

"You're not supposed to be here," I didn't bite at his lie, "I'd suggest that you leave that piece of private property you're holding, and turn tail to the ship you sailed in on."

"Private property?" The machete-wielding man raised an eyebrow, "Just because this island is unclaimed by any world government doesn't make this private property."

"That," I pointed towards the field journal in his other hand, "is private property."

"Then you've seen these creatures?" The man with the rifle took a step closer, the muzzle of the barrel dipping towards the ground.

"No one has seen them."

"No, you have," A third voice cut in behind me, a rag swiftly covering my mouth and a rough hand pulling my own away from the radio, both arms dragging me against a solid frame of another man, "Strip her down. Us looking for them alone isn't working."

Both of the men in front stowed their weapons and began to dismantle my vest, ripping my backpack off and rifling through it. The mesh vest was left empty after they took off my instruments, and most of the samples I had in my backpack were cast aside. I struggled against the man holding me, the heel of my boot slamming down on his toes multiple times before I realized that he wasn't flinching from the hits.

"You're going to lead us to the naga you've put so much work towards," The third man leaned down, calmly talking into my ear as one of his poaching partners held up my journal detailing the clutchmates. With the gag fastened around my head, I shook my head furiously and tried to level a glare at him.

"I never said you had a choice," The smile he gave held something sinister and the look in his dark eyes made my heart settle into the pit of my stomach. My instincts screamed at me to follow his instructions, for fear of something worse happening to me. Both of my hands were tied behind my back and I was pushed forward towards the deeper parts of the jungle, shoved through the rougher brush as the men tried to decipher my shorthand behind me.

The jungle thinned out a little, the thicker trees behind us and walking towards the other part of the uncharted island. The humidity began to thicken the air around us, beads of sweat clinging to cloth and skin as the ground dipped into what felt like a giant basin. I shook my head to try and flick the sweat from my forehead, feeling a little sting as some got trapped in the corners of my eyes.

My eyes caught a quick movement in the thin trees above the group, glancing up to see a long vine draped along the thicker boughs. The men sounded distracted, complaining that the journal mentioned nothing about the difference in biomes, and I took my chance to look more closely at the vine.

"'Green' could mean anything, you dolt," The first man sighed, smacking the second over the head as he flipped through the journal again, "Ask her about the details, since she's the one that wrote them down."

I noticed the scaly pattern on the vine before my head was yanking down towards the field journal, seeing the page about a few of the clutchmates. A thick index finger pulled the gag from my mouth before being pointed at my scribbling of the word 'green'.

"Why didn't you write down more? Are we to look for just a green snake?"

"That's all I saw, so I wrote it down," I held back from rolling my eyes, licking my lips to try to soothe the ache they were feeling from being stretched for too long.

"For a scientist, you're pretty terrible at writing notes," The third man sighed, "Maybe you weren't paying attention because you were...doing something else to the snake?"

"Excuse me?" I raised an eyebrow, pivoting on my heel to face the men, "I'm here to do my job, not for pleasure or whatever satisfies your kink of hunting animals as trophies!"

"And what is your job exactly?" The second man sneered, the machete cutting a path through some of the branches before it was pointed at me.

"I'm only here to document the species that live here and report back to the research community," The machete tip touched the zipper of my vest, making me back away a little to avoid being skewered, "Nothing less, nothing more."

The third man, who I had labelled as the guy in charge of the other two, slightly raised an eyebrow before taking the journal from the second and flipping through it.

"We have some of these already, so we'd just like to catch the other two and leave you be on your dumb island," He was flipping between the first and third clutchmate with a partially disinterested look on his face, "You tell us where they are, the faster you'll get those binds off and the sooner you'll be back to your research for the greater good of mankind."

I narrowed my eyes, masking the shock that ran through my system. They had the book, and if they truly had the others 'caught', then that could only mean that killing the naga probably wasn't an option for this poaching group.

"You're lying."

"Are you willing to risk that chance?" He closed the book over his thumb, waving it around towards the island, "Look at where you are. You have no GPS, nothing to help you get back to your base...Either you cooperate with us, or you don't."

"I refuse," I dug the balls of my feet into the dirt and underbrush, squaring up my shoulders and glaring at the leader. My vision exploded with color as the spine of my field journal collided with the side of my head, staggering me and my body falling against a nearby tree before sliding to the ground. An eruption of noises sounded out around me as I fought to stay conscious and get back to my feet.

Gunfire cracked around me, my ears ringing with the pressure as I felt something thrown against my face, rocks and dirt upheaved from some kind of fight. It hurt to move my head, but I was able to glance over towards the commotion to see a large length of vine fight against the three men, coiling around and thrashing out. A fourth man had somehow joined in the fight, his upper body completely bare except for a torn green shirt stuck to his back, the color matching the pants he wore.

I blinked a few times and my mind put together the scene more clearly. The fourth man wasn't wearing any clothes, his bright green hair and scaly back meshing perfectly to the long tail that was being used as a bludgeoning weapon, its coils hammering against the three men trying to pin the naga down.

Fighting against the binds tying my wrists together, I rolled my shoulders and tucked my feet underneath the rope to get my hands in front of me. Reaching around one of the men trying to fight against the naga, I pulled back hard and caught his neck with the wrist binding, pressing my knees against his back to push him into a chokehold. His own hands grabbed at

anything that was in reach, finding some purchase on my loose hair and yanking twice as hard. I groaned through my teeth as I felt some hairs pull loose, but kept him in the same position until he grabbed more hair and pulled me over his shoulder, slamming me into the ground and removing his neck from the chokehold.

"You bitch!" He growled as a rough hand shoved my head into the ground, his other hand reaching towards my tethered hands.

"Having a tough time with her?" The leader laughed out, taking in a deep breath. I couldn't see what happened to the naga, but I could only hope that he was okay.

"She caught me off-guard is all."

"Looks like we caught the, uh...third one," The rustling of papers confirmed that they were looking through my journal, "Just need one more, and we can go back."

I was lifted off of the ground and thrown over someone's shoulder, my arms pinned underneath my waist as their arm curled around to keep me there. The naga and I made eye contact as I was carried past him, his dark green eyes narrowing into a glare as a wicked scowl crossed his mouth.

A naga that looked like an eastern green mamba, and the first time meeting him was when I was used as bait. The bright emerald green would've been hard to spot in the trees, despite his impressive length. He was definitely shorter than Jyushi but not by that much. Some kind of muzzle was clamped onto his head, ensuring that he couldn't bite anyone while his tail was crimped up and locked into position. He was carried between the other two men, but his glare always focused on me.

We were carried back through the jungle, and I recognized the spring we passed as the same one that fed the river near the lab. Diverting from the river, it was another stretch of time before I was dumped onto the ground and tied to a bush, a small look of confusion passing over the naga's face before the glare returned to be aimed at the men.

"Thanks for your help, dollface," The man that carried me gave me a rough pat against my cheek, "Just wait here."

With him rejoining the others to carry the naga, the group vanished into the dense forest. Spitting out the loose gag, I struggled against the binds and winced as the rope rubbed against the raw skin. My attempts grew weaker as my body pleaded for rest from the pain, the noise the group was making had disappeared long ago.

"Damn it...damn it...!" I tried twisting around to see if I'd be able to undo the knot keeping me pinned to the bush, but every little movement my wrists made burned like fire.

I was the one who decided to write down what I found out about the nagas, and what Jyushi had told me. How was I to know that there'd be poachers on the is-

How did they get my field journal from inside the lab?

I gritted my teeth, the answer angering me as I pulled more violently at the rope.

Erika

gave it to them. She took my private notes and gave it to some poaching group, probably in trade for whatever profit they'd make from the catch. I thought that Erika and I were supposed to be a team for discovering and documenting new life, but here I sat in the middle of nowhere without anyone to help me.

A snap of a branch from behind me chilled me to the bone, fear racing up my spine as I felt something come closer. I barely turned to look when I was tackled to the ground by something black.

Two hands pinned my shoulders to the ground, twisting my arms into an awkward position that almost pulled them out of their sockets. I cried out in shock before the wind was knocked from my lungs, a heavy weight shifting over my waist and legs to keep me completely grounded.

"Where are they taking my brothers?"

Chapter 6

"Where are they taking my brothers?" A dark voice barked out above me, my eyes catching a pair of red-rimmed hues staring down at me, the black irises flexing in size as the creature monitored my reaction.

A full head of messy blood-red hair spread out like a crown from my pinned perspective, the red pattern continuing under his skin and re-emerging as scales down the sides of his neck before flowering out over his shoulders and vanishing back into the skin down his arms and sides. His lips hadn't closed from the question, revealing a pair of double fangs that threatened to extend to their full length.

"I don't know," My voice caught in my throat, scared of the uncertainty that I wouldn't make it out of the trip alive. I closed my eyes tightly as the naga lowered his face towards mine, flinching as I felt something light dart over my face before his hands slid up my arms and messed with the rope near my wrists. The relief was instant as he pulled away, but I didn't have time to revel in it before he grabbed my vest and lifted me onto his back.

"You'll be useful as a distraction, then."

I didn't respond, finding myself holding onto his shoulders for dear life as the naga moved forward, his chest low to the ground and easily maneuvering around the trees. Looking over my shoulder to see the coloration of his scales, I noticed that most of his tail was an iridescent black that blended into a bright red as it neared the tip. The scales closest to his waist had the same blend of color, and I held onto his shoulders tighter as my jaw locked in fear. His scales and appearance only brought one name to mind.

Oso, and he was a red-headed krait naga. Not on the list of the world's most deadly snakes, but still not something to tease or mess around with...especially when he was over four times the size of a normal krait.

"Are you done cowering back there?" I slightly flinched as he slowed down, his head looking down at me as the red and black eyes gave an unblinking stare.

"I'm not cowering," I loosened my grip slightly, "I just don't want to do anything that would cause you to kill me."

"I have plenty of reasons to kill you right now," Oso's eyes narrowed, "In fact, I have six of them. One for each of my brothers being taken, thanks to you, and one for even setting foot on our home."

"I didn't know that we were intruding!" I met his glare, partially leaning away from his back, "I was hired to help document this island, and if I knew that this would happen then I wouldn't have come."

Oso stopped completely, raising his torso from its hovering position and twisting around to fully face me. The movement made me let go and fall off his body, landing on the ground.

"It's a little too late for 'if-then', isn't it?"

"I want to fix my mistake!" I recovered my footing and quickly stood up, glaring up at him as he held himself higher than me, "It was my idiocy that made this happen, so let me fix it. After that, I'll leave you and your clutchmates alone."

"You won't get that chance," Oso hissed, racing down with his pupils completely contracted and fangs bared. I held my breath as he came closer, staring him in the eyes. His fangs stopped less than an inch from my neck, a silent moment passing between us as my heart pounded like a war drum. Oso's shoulders flinched before he pulled away, a laugh growing louder as his whole body relaxed and lowered to my eye level.

"You've got some nerve, (y/n)," Oso opened his mouth wider in a yawn, his fangs folding back into their relaxed position before he looked at me, the pupils dilated to a normal size, "If you want to fix your mistake, then make a plan for it."

"I don't...really have one," I glanced away, clenching my fists. I didn't have enough information to make a plan, and the three men had already proved that they'd kick my ass in a fight.

"Then we'll improv," Oso held out a hand to me, "If you manage to free Jyushi or Choro, then we'll be fine."

"What about you? What are you going to do?" I raised an eyebrow before taking his hand, and was led back to my original position on his back.

"What any animal does when protecting their family," His lips curled into a smile, "I'm gonna kill who I can."

As I initially thought, the poachers were using the same landing pad that Erika and I were dropped off at. The clearing was just wide enough for their monstrosity of a helicopter, completely dwarfing the one that I was dropped off in. The nose was pointed away from the direction that Oso and I came from, with the cargo doors and loading ramp wide open as the three men from before were arranging cargo containers, possibly getting ready to load them.

"Can you tell which container has which clutchmate?" I whispered as I climbed off Oso's back, removing my mesh vest so that it wouldn't snag onto anything. There were a few silent moments as Oso slipped his tongue between his lips, the tines waving about lazily before flicking back inside.

"Choro is the one closest to us, but I can't pinpoint anyone else..."

The clearing didn't offer a lot of cover between the jungle line and the nearest container. The leader of the poachers was messing with something on the container before walking away, revealing a solid-looking padlock on the handle. A glance at the other visible containers showed that each one was locked up similarly.

"I'm not going to be able to get them open," I motioned towards the locks, keeping low and quiet as another two men left the helicopter cargo bay,

dragging out a chain and hook, "But we don't have time to find an option..."

"Find a way," Oso slithered around the open field, hugging the tree line and disappearing into the foliage. I moved to catch up with him before silently grunting and changing direction, moving along the treeline around the opposite way.

I had no idea what Oso was going to do, but he gave me directions. Free Choro or Jyushi, and the rest will figure itself out.

I darted towards the container that Oso had labelled as Choro's, pressing myself against the metal rigged wall and creeping towards the front. Pausing before looking around the corner, I didn't hear any noise from close by and took my chance. The door lever was sealed by the padlock, with no key or crowbar in sight. I gave it a solid tug, hoping that the poacher was dumb enough to not lock it...but no luck.

Biting my bottom lip in thought, I spotted a shadow growing from the left side of the container and quickly ducked around the right side, taking in deep breaths to calm down.

"Time for a nap, monster," The gravelly voice of the second man was recognizable, my ears picking up the metallic 'clank' of the padlock dropping from the chain. A hiss emitted from the container before I heard a rifle chamber a round.

Taking a chance, I raced around the open door and collided with the second man, grabbing the slim rifle and fighting to pull it from his grasp as we fell against the other door of the container.

"You bitch!" He cried out in shock. I tore the rifle from his hands and stepped away, levelling the muzzle at his chest, "Okay, hey now..."

"Release him," I motioned my head towards the chained naga behind me, resting my finger against the trigger.

"...no."

In the span of a second, he pulled a pistol from a back holster and aimed it at me. Two gunshots cracked out at nearly the same time, causing the other men to shout in alarm. A tranquilizer dart settled high on the man's chest, the tuft of bright pink material blooming like a flower as he fell to the ground, the pistol falling from his hand. The rifle fell from my hands as a horrendous pounding thudded in my ears, staggering back as I tried to regain my lost sense. My hands trembled as I pressed them against my ears, the thudding turning into a ringing as muffled shouting erupted around me.

Choro...had to free Choro...

I fully turned towards the naga, seeing him strain against his binds and trying to motion for him to calm down. My body lowered towards the closest restraint, fiddling with the handle mechanism before seeing it fall away from his body, the vibration of it hitting the metal floor rumbling through my boots. Muttering mute apologies, I moved closer towards his torso where his arms were lashed together. Choro stilled a little as I managed to free one of his arms, maneuvering around to free the other one before I felt someone grab my left ankle and roughly pulling me off of the naga.

The person forced me to turn over, planting the muzzle of a rifle against my sternum and yelling something at me, his voice completely muffled against the damage of the earlier gunshot. I raised both hands towards my head, seeing a look of satisfaction cross his face as he motioned for me to sit up. Another man walked out from behind the one threatening me, a slim rifle in his hand as he levelled it towards Choro. The men seemed to laugh, talking amongst themselves before walking away as the slim rifle was reloaded. My eyes went wide as I looked behind me, seeing a tranquilizer dart nestle near Choro's neck before turning to see the rifle aimed at me.

The dart hit me in my stomach.

Chapter 7

I groaned as I opened my eyes, my body bruised from some kind of abuse and screaming for me to lay still just a little while longer. I felt soft sheets underneath my fingers and gently moved my arms to discover that I was laying on some sort of hospital bed.

"(Y/n) (L/n), I presume?"

Hearing my name, I glanced around where I was to see dark blue walls with ceiling tiles that hung low in the room. Furrowing my eyebrows, my eyes darted to see who was speaking to me.

An older man dressed in hospital whites and holding a clipboard returned the look. He was grizzled with slightly tanned skin weathered by age and wrinkles, the hair on his head and beard were light brown with streaks of gray. The doctor seemed to be waiting for an answer from me.

"Ah, yes, that's me."

"Do you know where you are?" The clipboard shifted in his hands as I tried to sit up, feeling my abs twitch in pain before slowly relaxing.

"No...I'm supposed to be on an island, documenting and researching new species as contracted by the University of California...in San Diego, California," I pressed a hand against my abs, feeling a thin pad of gauze taped to my skin. Lifting up my shirt a little, I visually confirmed what I had felt, seeing the pad clinging to my skin with a small dot of red in the middle of it.

"You're no longer on an island, Ms. (Y/n)," The doctor moved towards a countertop and set the clipboard down, "You were captured by some sort of monster and were dragged into a confinement container before they could rescue you. The team sent to find you said that they had no choice but to knock you out with a tranquilizer so that you wouldn't be eaten by the monster."

I froze as he spoke, my memory not matching up to what he was telling me. There didn't seem to be any tone of uncertainty.

"Okay...so where am I, then?"

"You're back home in the United States of America."

I couldn't help but stare at him. The doctor seemed to take this as a sign of panic, instead of dumbfoundedness.

"I know that everything's been quite traumatic for you, but the team did splendid work in getting you here safely," He nodded in agreement with himself, "The organizer of the team has requested that you stop by their office before you're able to leave for home."

"Did he mention why?"

"To make sure that you're all right, and to ensure that you're transported safely back to the university," He turned back to the clipboard and unhooked some paperwork, "You haven't suffered any signs of distress, so I have no reason to keep you here."

I tentatively took the paperwork and started to leave, walking down the halls of what appeared to be a hospital. Entering the lobby, I looked through the glass windows to see civilization again, the city surrounding the hospital in full motion with automotive and foot traffic. Past my own reflection, I could see the people walking around the streets, some heading to work while others were enjoying their day off.

"Ms. (L/n)?" A gruff voice called out from behind me, one of the two men that had come to stand near me in the reflective glass. I turned to look at both of them, but didn't recognize either one of them from the landing zone.

"Yes...?"

"We're here to escort you to Mr. Calmine's office."

I paled at the name.

I knew who Calmine was, and so did most everyone else in the biology field. He was well known for stealing fauna from their habitats, disfiguring them and shoving them into the spotlight as either a new variant of their species, or a natural freak. The only reason he wasn't in prison was because he had the money to pay off the right people. If he had the six nagas in his grasp...

"Fine," I furrowed my brows in anger, clenching my fists as I followed one man through the hospital lobby while the other fell behind me. My one damn mistake had grown into a much bigger problem than I anticipated, spreading much faster than I wanted it to. I was curious about the nagas, but I never wanted them to be removed from their island.

"Is a pleasure tah meet the author in person."

Calmine was a lard of a man, with a belly as round as a ball and as many chins as I had fingers on my hands. His pressed suit wrapped around his frame without a hint of stretching, but just because someone dressed nicely didn't mean that their personality wasn't ugly.

"If you're referring to my field journal, that's private property and I'd like it back."

"Ah, come nah, sweetie," His Southern drawl was thick, making some words harder to hear than others, "Ah don't have the journal tha' yawr talkin 'bout, but ah do have the fruits o' yawr research. Six mythological creatures tha' ain't never been seen before nah."

Calmine pointed a sausage-like finger towards me, a smile trying to pry back the folds around his mouth.

"Ah wan ya tah work as their keepah."

"They're not for gawking! You paid for people to rip them from their island, quite violently I might add, and you want to show them off to

make some money

?" I would've stood up from my chair if I wasn't held against it by the two men from before, their hands pressing down on my shoulders.

"Nah, mah dear...Ah wan

you

tah make some money offa those scaly beasts. Workin' on the field is tirin' an exhaustin'," He straightened out some files on his desk, "Tah guarantee their

safe return home

, ah wan ya tah work as their keepah while the show is tourin' throughout the world. Keep 'em fed an lookin' healthy, and ah'll pay the boys tah put them back in the wild afterwards."

"The university won't allow me to-"

"Yawr transfer papers were confirmed yestahday when the helicopter landed," Calmine cut me off, a smug smile resting on his lips, "Ya start inna few minutes."

"You're going to kill them!" I tried to stand up, leaning forward to rush his desk before the two men behind me forced me into an awkward kneeling position, my eyes glaring up at the greedy man from the ground.

"Nah, dearie," Calmine rounded the desk, staring down at me with a smile on his face, "

Yawr

gonna kill 'em. Iffn ya don't follow mah orders, then ah'll have 'em put outta yawr incapable care...permanently."

I could only stare in horror, realization dawning as I put the pieces together. I was just as much of a prisoner as the nagas were. If I did anything to

jeopardize his 'freak show' nagas, or if they did anything to displease him in any way...the seven of us would be used as blackmail against each other. The men behind me dragged me to my feet, hauling me out of Calmine's office and into an elevator, pressing a button under the ground floor.

My mind was numb.

How was I going to get them out of here when they'd be killed if Calmine found out about anything I planned, and how was I going to leave unscathed with them?

"They're still out of it. Feed them and make sure they survived the flight over," One of the men commanded as I was shoved down in front of six cargo containers, looking back towards the elevator as the doors shut. I caught sight of a keycard pad next to the call button, which probably meant that I wasn't going anywhere.

Slowly standing up with a hand pressed against the gauze underneath my shirt, I moved towards the preparation area installed next to the last cargo container. Opening the fridge door slowly, I looked everywhere in the room for some kind of security camera and released a small breath when I didn't see one. It didn't mean that I wasn't being watched, but I still couldn't take the chance to do something that would make Calmine angry. Seeing that the fridge was partially stocked with various cuts of meat, I took some of the larger cuts out and lay them on the metal table.

The cuts used for human food weren't suitable for feeding animals, but they were what I was given to work with. I'd have to find a way to ensure that the nagas got the right kind of meat...

Letting the meat warm up from the fridge, I turned my attention to the cargo containers, walking closer to them and verifying that each container didn't have the locks engaged anymore.

Moving to the one furthest on the left, I pulled the door level out to disengage the bar hooks from their position before pulling open the door. Fully opening the half-door and moving towards the other half, I spotted the naga inside still fully chained to the container with his entire body limp.

The light from the room spilled into the container, revealing the black and red scales of Oso.

Chapter 8

I gasped before running into the container, lifting up Oso's limp head to see his face pockmarked with bruises and cuts that trailed down to his shoulders and chest. A metal muzzle covered his mouth and nose, just like the one the men used on Choro, while three tranquilizer darts still hung from his skin.

"Oso...!" I barely whispered his name as I checked the rest of his body for wounds, saddened to see that the men at the landing pad had really roughed him up. Some of his scales were split from damage and would take a few sheds to fully heal, but the majority of the damage was on his human half. Carefully twisting out the barbed darts, I tossed them out of the container before I made eye contact with the black-and-red eyes of Oso.

My heart raced in fear as his black irises contracted into thin slits, the red sclera widening as Oso and I stared at each other for a brief moment before he blinked and lowered his head, letting a groan slip through the muzzle.

"Let me guess...it didn't work."

The tone in his voice sounded broken, sounding like a man that had lost everything. I sucked in a short breath, wrapping my arms around his neck and torso in a tight hug. I couldn't find the right words to say, not wanting to sound insincere or saying anything superfluous. With his arms still chained to the sides of the container, Oso lowered his head into the crook of my neck, returning the hug as much as he was allowed to.

"The other containers are here, and I was going to open all of them so you could talk to each other," I didn't pull away from the hug until he moved his head up, "I don't have the key that unlocks the chains..."

"Go check on them..." The slight urgency in his voice was mirrored by the look in his eyes. I nodded before moving out of the container, leaving the doors wide open so he could hear everything.

Opening the next container, I paused as I took in the naga's appearance, standing a little out of the light so the colors could be more visible.

This was a new naga, one that I hadn't met before. He was chained up like Oso and Choro were, his arms stretched wide as the chains tethered them to the sides of the metal container while two more chains from the ceiling restrained his head movement. His tail was clamped into tight angles that would've made it nearly impossible for him to move anywhere. My frown deepened as I cautiously walked into the container, keeping my hands to myself as I looked at the scale patterns all along his body.

The coloration caught my eye first, the words of Jyushi echoing in my head as he described one of his clutchmates being colored 'purple'. The color was indeed a light purple, with various shades of it all along his body forming different sized circles, or saddles, in the patterning. The scales went up higher on his waist before sinking into the skin around his midriff and re-emerging along the top of his arms and neck, disappearing into the skin as they neared his head. His hair was a deep lavender, with a darker 'v' pattern forming from the front of his bangs and opening up near the top of his head.

Ichi. The naga's name was Ichi, and he was a lavender corn naga.

There weren't any visible wounds that I could see on either his chest or arms, but I still moved cautiously closer while bringing my hands up to support his head. Corn snakes weren't venomous, but would still bite defensively. If I compared the size of Oso's and Jyushi's fangs to their normal-sized relatives, then I still wouldn't want to get bitten by Ichi's curved ice pick-like fangs.

"(Y/n)?" I heard Oso call out from his container.

"Ichi is next to you," I responded as I pulled out the two darts lodged in his shoulder and neck.

"Is he okay?"

"Physically, he looks fine," I gently lay his head down into a relaxed position, stepping away from the unconscious naga and leaving the

container, "He's still asleep, but I pulled the darts from him."

Hearing a grunt of approval from Oso, I opened the next container to see Jyushi staring at me.

"(Y/n)!" He launched himself against the chains, the metal creaking and straining against the muscular naga. His restraints were doubled up compared to Oso and Ichi, with twice as many darts sticking from his chest. I rushed forward towards him, avoiding pushing in the darts further as I gave him a hug.

"Jyushi, you're all right," I couldn't hide the relief in my voice, feeling Jyushi try to wrap himself around me and fighting against the clamps kinking up his body. Hearing the metal groan against his efforts, I pulled back and held his head in my hands, "Please, don't do that...you'll hurt yourself even more and I don't want Oso mad at me, okay?"

He stopped and looked into my eyes, his body finally relaxing as the smile returned to his lips.

"I was worried about you, (y/n). I thought they captured you, too," Jyushi leaned forward into my hands, partially closing his eyes as he tried to get me to move my hands around his head.

"I'm all right. I'm going to remove the darts from you, okay?" Shifting my hands down from his head to his chest, I felt Jyushi slightly buck against them as if he desperately wanted to feel the warmth. Taking out the barbed darts as gently as I could, I tossed the seven darts out of the container, hearing them clatter against the cement floor.

"What about these?" Jyushi rolled his shoulders around, drawing my attention to the chains holding him.

"Not yet. I'll be able to take them off soon, but you have to stay like this just a little longer."

"Why?"

I searched for the right words to say.

"I need to find the key first, and then I'll be able to take them off."

"Oh, okay," Jyushi smiled, satisfied with the answer before settling down, "Are my brothers here?"

"Yeah, you're all here. Oso and Ichi are over there," I pointed to his right before pointing towards his left, "and everyone else is that way. I still need to check on them, but I wanted to stop in to see how you were doing."

"I'm doing better now that I know you're okay," His orange eyes closed with a happy smile. I gave him a nod while humming in agreement, waving as I continued my wellness check.

As I opened the door, I heard the chains rattle violently and snap taunt when they reached their full length. Choking a cry, I scrambled behind the other closed door, pressing up against it as the container rocked gently to a standstill. There was no warning hiss, nothing to notify me of the pissed off naga inside.

"I'm not here to hurt you," I tried to keep my voice steady as I turned my head towards the partially open door, "I just want to make sure that you're okay."

There was no answer. I glanced back to the meat on the table, carefully moving away from the container and grabbing a knife to cut off a chunk of the meat. With a sizable cut, I held it carefully in my hands before slowly opening the other door, the chains rattling and straining once more as I stumbled back from the container.

A pair of copper eyes glared right into my own hues, the black pupils narrowed so thin that I could barely see them. The naga's scales were strikingly blue, almost turquoise in color before fading to a lighter shade near his ventral, or bottom, scales while getting deeper in color on his dorsal scales. The only other color on his body was near the tip of his tail, where the blue shifted into a dirty red-brown color.

"Blue insularis..." I looked at the naga in awe, amazed by the natural coloration of the blue scales. I was snapped to the reality of the situation when a bright pink forked tongue flicked out from between his lips, "Ah, I have food..."

The naga remained completely still, not making a single sound. If he was a naga based on the blue insularis pit viper, then I was in trouble if he managed to even nick me with a fang. Taking small, slow steps into the container, I held out the meat in front of me. The thin, forked tongue came out again, and I saw his copper eyes shift from my face to the meat. My hands held onto the smallest part of the meat, the majority of it between my fingers and his fangs.

Another step closer brought me into what he considered an acceptable range, striking out quickly and biting down on the meat before yanking it out of my soft grip, settling back into a strike position and staring at me, the meat still clenched in his jaws. I didn't move forward or back, knowing that he could drop the meat and strike out at me with the same precision. I had to wait for him to start eating before it was remotely 'safe'.

His bottom jaw started working the food into his mouth, keeping an eye on me the entire time as I watched in fascination as the meat chunk, easily the size of my forearm, slid into his mouth and down his throat.

"My name is (y/n)," I offered softly, "I'm not here to hurt you."

"That was gross," The naga opened his mouth wide, stretching out his large fangs and adjusting them before closing his maw.

"The food? I know," I slightly relaxed as he loosened himself from the striking position, his body still clamped into odd angles, "I'm gonna see if I can get better food for you and your clutchmates."

"They're here, too?" He raised an eyebrow, raising his head a little. I took the brief movement to look his body over for wounds.

The blue scales disappeared into the skin around his waist, similar to the others, before wrapping around his chest like an open vest and disappearing

before they touched his neck or head. A thin line of scales followed the top of his arm all the way down to his hand on each side. His hair carried the same color as his dorsal scales, light around the ends as well.

"Yeah, they're all here," I didn't move closer and put my hands behind my back as he leaned forward, his tongue darting in and out towards me. He was smelling the ones that I'd touched previously.

"What about Choro and Todo?"

"They're next to this container," I glanced in the direction I was referring to, "I still need to check on them."

I paused for a moment, looking at the two darts in his shoulder and midriff.

"Am I able to pull those out?" I motioned with my head towards the darts. He looked down at them before speaking.

"Go ahead."

Swallowing the lump in my throat, I slowly made my way towards the naga and gently placed one hand against his skin while the other gripped the dart carefully. Removing them like I had done for the others, I held my hands up afterwards and stepped away just as slowly to show that I wasn't going to do anything else.

"I'm not going to bite you."

"That's certainly

not

what you were showing me a few minutes ago," I looked up at him, seeing that his eyes had completely relaxed.

"If you were different from what Jyushi had told us, then I wouldn't have taken the meat," The naga shifted uncomfortably in the chains, as if reminded of them, "But I didn't smell their distress on you, so I took it. I'm sorry that I struck at you when you opened the door, though."

"It's...all right. I can understand why you did it," I looked down at my feet before glancing up at him, "I would probably do the same if I was in your position."

"May I introduce myself again?" The naga tilted his head to the side a little, an apologetic smile on his lips.

"Uh, sure."

"My name is Kara," He tried to bring an arm to his chest, but the chain restrained him from moving more than a few inches, "I like to be with my brothers, have a wonderful singing voice, and...have pricked myself with my own fangs more than I'll ever admit to."

"Nice to meet you, Kara," I tried to not laugh at his introduction, seeing him smile almost as wide as Jyushi, "I'm (y/n), and I'm here to take care of you and your brothers. You mentioned that the meat was gross...did I give you the wrong kind?"

"No..." Kara's pitch went a little higher as he looked thoughtful, "It wasn't the wrong kind, it just tasted...bland."

"I suppose it would be, compared to whatever you were eating before," I took a mental note to ask for fresher meat, not whatever I had been given, "It'll probably be like that for a little while, but I'll do my best to flavor it up for you."

"I'm sure that whatever you do will be well received by us."

Excusing myself from Kara's presence, I took in a breath and looked back at the four open cargo containers. I'm sure that they all heard what I said and what had happened, and could only guess that they were waiting for their own turn to eat. I had to finish this up quickly.

I knew that Choro still had to be muzzled, so I was probably going to be okay opening his container, but I wasn't sure about Todo. I didn't know what kind of snake he was based on, and the description Jyushi had given me

really threw me for a loop. Was there a snake with naturally occurring pink scales?

Tugging open the next door, I heard the rattle of chains and a slight whimper before looking inside to see a naga cowering away from the door. I pushed the other door wide open, staying out of the container when I didn't see a muzzle on this naga.

"You're going to be all right," I quietly called out to the naga.

"Totty, she's not going to hurt you," Kara called out from his container, "She's the one Jyushi told us about."

"Yeah, she's the nice warm human!" Jyushi practically yelled out from his chains.

"(Y/n)?" The cowering naga slightly relaxed, looking at me with completely black eyes as he spoke. Some yellow scales created a small mask that stretched past his eyes and disappeared into his hair, the mask bordered by a thin line of black scales. His hair was black with spots of pink fashioned into a diamond-like pattern, creating near perfect lines from his bangs to the back of his head. The black and yellow scales created a perfect pattern of spots along the back of his arms and sides, leaving his belly a near yellowish color before the yellow scales sprouted right underneath his waistline. I didn't see any darts in him, wondering if he was caught sleeping.

Todo moved a little more, inspecting me just like I was inspecting him, and revealing a line of bright pink ventral scales on the lower part of his tail. I couldn't help but stare.

Jyushi was right. Todo had naturally occuring

pink

scales!

"Ah, yeah," I snapped out of my reverie, remembering that Todo had asked my name, "I'm (y/n)."

"You were staring."

"Of course I was," I wasn't going to lie, "I've never seen that shade of pink on a snake before. I've only seen faded pink or light salmon colored scales...but never

that

bright."

"I guess I'm just that special, huh?" The look on Todo's face completely shifted from scared to smug, the corners of his lips curling upwards in a cat-like smile, "And since I'm

so special

, would you mind releasing me from these?"

"I can't. They're locked, and I don't have the key," I shook my head, "I can get you some meat, though. There isn't much flavor, but it'll tide you over for a little while longer."

"I guess that'll do," Todo sighed, his body language completely shedding the fear from before, making me wonder if he was even scared in the first place.

"Let me open up Choro's container, and then I'll get all of you food."

He huffed in dismissal, looking over his chains with rapt focus as I left the cargo container, holding my breath as I stood in front of the last container. Slowly releasing, I pulled open both doors of the container to see Choro, chained up and still muzzled.

His body was limp like Ichi's, possibly still knocked out from the tranquilizer darts. I entered the container and gently removed the darts from

his skin, noticing that there was a little more give compared to the others. Looking closely at his scales, I clenched my teeth in worry.

Choro was starting to go into shed. Jyushi had mentioned that his shedding went poorly due to the stress given to him from the other brothers, and this would only add to that. I would have to ask Calmine for Choro to be left alone for a few days until his shedding was complete, and then beg for more time so he could remove the stuck shed himself.

I probably wasn't going to be given any of that.

"Choro...?" I lifted his head with my hands, seeing that his eyes were completely closed. A small frown settled on my face as I brushed away some of his bangs, gently lowering his head again before stepping out of the container.

"Why are you leaving the cages open?!" A near shout resonated in the room, snapping my attention to the elevator to see the same pair of men drawing pistols from their hidden holsters, switching their aim between the six cargo containers. I heard all of the awake nagas shift about, Oso's hiss emanating from his container.

"I'm doing what you told me to do, making sure they're all okay after the trip," I leveled a glare at them, walking towards the table with the meat, "Was just about to feed them. Are you here to help with that?"

"And risk getting bit by those freaks?" The man closest to me pointed at Oso, "No way. We're here just to make sure that you're not releasing them."

"I'll need to have those muzzles removed one way or another. I'll need to feed those two," I pointed towards Oso's and Choro's containers, "Those muzzles don't allow that to happen."

I held out my hand to the men expectantly. One of them groaned before digging a hand around one of his pants pockets, tossing me a small metal key.

"Secure them once they've been fed. Calmine wants them moved to their exhibits ASAP," He lowered the pistol, but stayed in the room with the other man, watching me as I swiftly cut up the meat I had pulled out into healthy chunks. I first went to Todo, giving him his share with an apologetic look before closing the doors and shifting the handle into a locked position. Next was Jyushi, who gobbled up his portion quickly and winced at the taste. After closing his doors, I moved to Oso and cautiously unlocked the muzzle. Oso only gave me an understanding look before taking his meat, finishing it quickly and calmly letting me put the muzzle back on. I closed Kara's doors with a solemn nod, knowing that he had already been fed.

"What about the other two?"

"They were still out when I checked," I looked towards the two remaining pieces of meat on the table, then back to my hands that were covered in meat juice, "I can try to wake them up, if you're in that much of a rush to move them."

"Do it."

I gave a silent sigh, grabbing one piece and heading towards Ichi's container to see him still unconscious. I went close to him and waved my hand in front of his face, letting the meat scent try to stir him awake.

Ichi drew in a deep breath, his dark eyes fluttering open and locking onto my face. I quickly put an index finger over my mouth, motioning for him to be quiet before holding out the meat to him. His eyes switched from me to the meat, then to the men behind me. I shook my head without looking behind me, trying to silently tell him that I wasn't with them. Ichi opened his mouth and took the meat, working it down as I closed the doors.

My mouth dried as I approached Choro's container. I could wake him up like I had with Ichi, despite the muzzle being on him but it was the attitude that came with his shedding cycle that I was more worried about. Standing in front of the green mamba naga, I waved my other hand in front of his nose and mouth, seeing his body slightly twitch.

"Choro, it's me...I have food for you," I kept my eyes on his head, slowly reaching up to the muzzle with the key, "I'm going to unlock the muzzle so you can eat, but I have to put it back on after you're done."

"...that's fine," came the soft reply as Choro angled his head so I could unlock the muzzle easier. Catching the muzzle in one hand, I held out the meat with the other, helping Choro line it up for him to easily swallow it, "...gross..."

"I know," I sighed, reaching back around his head to put the muzzle back on, "I'll do what I can to get better food next time, and I'll see if you're able to take a soak for your shed."

"Okay..." Choro almost growled out, turning his head from me as I pulled away. Closing and locking the container doors, I turned to glare at the men while throwing the key back to them.

"Now what do you want me to do?"

Naga!Matsu References

(All of their widths are scaled up from their snake counterparts, and their lengths vary between each species)

Oso (Red-Headed Krait,

Bungarus flaviceps

).

Length: 29 feet.

Habitats: Thailand, Cambodia, Vietnam, southern Myanmar, Peninsular Malaysia, Borneo, and a number of Malaysian and Indonesian islands.

Bites from these venomous snakes are rare, and so their venom is little-studied. Krait venom appears to function primarily as a neurotoxin, preventing communication across neuromuscular structures, causing paralysis and death by asphyxiation because the victims can no longer breathe on their own.

Kara (Blue Insularis Pit Viper,

Trimeresurus insularis

). Also called: white-lipped island pit viper, Lesser Sunda pit viper, Sunda Island pit viper

Length: 20 feet.

Habitats: the lesser Sunda Islands of Indonesia.

While their venom rarely kills, it's incredibly unpleasant to get a bite from a white-lipped island pit viper. They have a hemorrhagic venom, which can cause pain, swelling, necrosis of the flesh, and severe bleeding, both internally and externally.

Choro (Eastern Green Mamba,

Dendroaspis angusticeps

).

Length: 24 feet.

Habitats: coastlines of southern Africa and East Africa.

The eastern green mamba's consists of both neurotoxins (targets the nerves) and cardiotoxins (targets the muscles, can damage the heart). Symptoms of envenomation include swelling of the bite site, dizziness and nausea, accompanied by difficulty breathing and swallowing, irregular heartbeat and convulsions progressing to respiratory paralysis. Bites that produce severe poisoning can be quickly fatal.

Ichi (Corn Snake,

Pantherophis guttatus

). Morph - Lavender.

Length: 22 feet.

Habitats: Southeastern United States.

Their docile nature, reluctance to bite, moderate adult size, attractive pattern, and comparatively simple care make them commonly kept pet snakes. Though superficially resembling the venomous copperhead and

often killed as a result of this mistaken identity, corn snakes are harmless and beneficial to humans. Corn snakes lack functional venom and help control populations of wild rodent pests that damage crops and spread disease.

Jyushi (Reticulated Python,

Malayopython reticulatus

). Morph - Albino.

Length: 36 feet.

Habitats: native to South Asia and Southeast Asia

While it mainly lives in rain forests, woodlands, and nearby grasslands, it is also associated with rivers and is found in areas with nearby streams and lakes. An excellent swimmer, it has even been reported far out at sea and has consequently colonized many small islands within its range. The reticulated python is an ambush hunter, usually waiting until prey wanders within strike range before seizing it in its coils and killing by constriction.

Todo (

Liophidium pattoni

).

Length: 16 feet.

Habitat: Madagascar (endemic, or unique to a defined geographic location)

Little is known about the snake, as it was recently discovered in 2010, but the genus it belongs to labels it as harmless to humans.

Chapter 9

Once more, I was held in Calmine's office with my hands tied behind the folding chair as I was forced to sit in front of his desk. He was speaking on the phone with the back of his chair facing me, talking to someone about some kind of change in some enclosure.

Something about more weight-bearing limbs. I had tried to tune in as much as I could to the conversation, but Calmine was speaking in such a heavy accent that I just couldn't understand most of what he was saying. When he had hung up the phone, though, I was fully focused on him.

"Sounds lah we'll be able tah move out t'night an be ready fer movin'em tah their temporary home inna mornin'," Calmine licked a thumb and rifled through some papers on his desk, barely giving me a second glance, "Is they health up'tah yawr expectation?"

"Oso needs to heal from the beating your men gave him, and Choro isn't fit to be moved around for a few days as he's going to shed soon," I held my head high, levelling a glare at him, "They'll need more appropriate meat since snakes can't eat what humans can. They need freshly killed food."

"Who?"

"The red and green nagas, sir," One of the men behind me clarified.

"The red one was shipped damaged," The other man stated, "She was talking to the green one about a 'soak' while feeding it."

"...they have names..."

"Damaged enough tah nah show?" Calmine reached for a drawer in his desk, pulling out a leather pouch and opening it up to remove a thick cigar. Cutting off one end and lighting it quickly, he took a short drag from it, the smoke wafting from the corners of his mouth.

"Yes," I quipped.

"Not really," The first man behind me stated over me, "I only saw a few cuts, but nothing disfiguring or something that would ruin the viewing pleasure."

"Did you need me here or not?!" I shouted over him, slamming my foot down on the ground for emphasis, "If you want me to keep them healthy, fine, but you need to

listen

to me! Oso's current health would certainly make people question your ethical treatment of creatures, and with Choro going into shed soon, you'll need to make sure that he has enough water in his 'enclosure' to soak in. A stuck shed could become detrimental to his health the longer you let it stay on him."

The room became silent after I caught my breath, the cigar smoke hanging heavy in the air as Calmine slightly raised an eyebrow towards me.

"Iffn ya want tah keep those monsters safe, yaw're gonna need tah learn a few rules," He took another puff from the cigar, "First, ya might think tha' yaw're gonna instantly have yawr way here, but ya need tah work hard tah gain those kinds of privileges. Second, them creatures'll have good feed in the San Diego Zoo. Third, y'all be restricted tah their enclosures only. Ya won't be able tah leave tah help others in their tasks, and y'all have an assigned bunk at the destination."

I gritted my teeth and my throat rumbled with a sound of disapproval, "If you wanna speak business, then I'll speak business. You're not going to get much money from showing Oso in his current state. Inspectors will see that he is damaged, and you'll have to keep him from public view until he's sufficiently healed enough to not warrant the Wildlife Conservation Society interfering."

Another puff from the cigar.

"How long ya think that's gonna be?"

"It depends on when he sheds next," I held his gaze from my restrained sitting position, "It could be in a few days, or up to a month."

"Fine," He blew out the remaining smoke held in his mouth before turning to the two men behind me, "Get the crates ready fer movin', and show (y/n) tah her new room."

The unloading had already been done by the time I was dropped off, my heart plummeting as I watched the security feed show them fully exploring their enclosures while poking and prodding at everything. Pushed past the security station, I was led to behind the naga enclosures where there was a small prep area with several feeding buckets, a refrigerator and a standing freezer, along with a set of knives for cutting up food.

In one of the nearby closets lay a twin-sized bed, a familiar duffel bag resting on top of the blanket. I rushed to open my clothing bag from the island, pulling everything out to see a weathered field journal nestled in the middle of the haphazard pile. Shoving my clothes back on top of it, I felt a little relieved that my field journal had come with me but was more suspicious about its sudden reappearance.

"Here's your keyring with everything you need on there," One of the men dropped a metal ring with a few keys hanging from it near the prep area, "Get the creatures accustomed to their enclosures."

As I left the closet bedroom, the two men who had been escorting me all day finally left, closing the exhibition maintenance area and locking the door behind them. I grabbed the key ring and quickly headed to the right-most naga enclosure, fumbling through the handful of keys until one fit the lock, twisting it and sliding open the large bolt lock that kept the door from being pulled open.

"Hello?" I called out as I stepped through the door, finding myself in a partially open forest with thick 'trees' that extended all the way to the top of

the enclosure, the branches reaching out towards each other and creating a highway along the fake canopy. The area was much wider than I was anticipating, painted walls extending the scenic illusion as the area was almost twenty-by-forty feet long.

"(Y/n)!"

I felt myself be grabbed from behind, pushed forward and lifted up in the same movement as strong arms held me close. Barely glancing down to see the white and yellow marked skin, I tried to look behind me to see the albino reticulated naga trailing from one of the nearby trees, his tail wrapped around a thick branch as most of his body was stretched out.

"Jyushi, I'm so happy to see you," With my arms pinned to my sides, I was at his mercy once more as he settled for wrapping around my legs, both of us laying on the substrate.

"I was really worried about you," I felt his arms tighten for a brief moment before immediately relaxing, "When you closed the doors, I thought that was the last time I'd see you."

"No," I tried to laugh, "I'm with you all until you're back home."

"We're going home after this?" The excitement in his voice made my heart drop, "Oh, I can't wait! I can show you my lair, and the hunting grounds I use, and maybe my brothers could do the same."

"That all sounds wonderful," I kept a smile on my face, "I look forward to it."

"It'll be lots of fun!" Jyushi flicked out his tongue, pausing for a moment before looking towards a completely black wall, "What's behind there?"

I looked towards where he was looking, recognizing the one-way window. It would allow spectators to look on the animal without the animal realizing it was being watched, encouraging more natural behavior. Normally it wasn't used for reptiles, but I could only guess that Calmine didn't want the nagas to see beyond what they had.

"Oh, that? It's blocked off to make sure that you don't get scared," I swallowed the lump in my throat, remembering that

everyone's

safety was in my hands, "There's gonna be some loud bangs against it, but it's nothing that can hurt you."

"Nothing can hurt me anyway! I'm too strong!" Jyushi laughed as he easily picked us from the ground, settling into a sitting position against the tree, "Some loud noises aren't going to scare me."

"That's good to hear, but I need to tell your brothers that," I dropped the hint for him to let me go, and he immediately loosened his coils and arms.

"Yeah, that's a good idea," He nodded in agreement, "Be sure to let Ichi know. He gets really worried about new things, so he probably needs the encouragement."

"I will," I waved farewell to Jyushi before heading back out the personnel door, closing and locking it behind me. One explanation down, five more to go...

I didn't know the order they had put the nagas in, and there was no visual clue on or around the doors for what enclosure was for which naga. The only thing that would tell me was just going in and seeing who was occupying it.

Moving down the line, I unlocked the next door and shut it behind me, feeling the dry air surround me like a blanket as the enclosure layout was similar to Jyushi's: towering 'trees' with slightly smaller branches to support a weight-bearing load, decorative vines weaving between the branches before trailing down to the ground where they dug underneath the leafy substrate. The 'black wall' was the same size as the one in Jyushi's, and I could safely guess that it was in all of their enclosures. The walls were painted to mimic the forest beyond the enclosure.

With a quick glance, I easily spotted the teal-blue scales among the brown-colored branches, the neutral color making the naga easily stand out with barely any greenery to hide him.

"Kara?" I moved a little closer to him, giving him room if he wanted to come closer to me.

"Ah, (y/n)," He slightly stirred, moving to look down at me from his tense coils. Kara was poised to strike, but I recognized the behavior from the snake he could be compared to, always tense for a strike even when they weren't hungry, "I thought I heard you through the wall."

"Yeah, I'm just checking up on you all. No one told me what order you were in, so I just decided to start at the end and work my way down," I folded my arms over my chest, looking towards the wall that separated Jyushi's and Kara's enclosures.

"Sounds sensible. Will we be here long?"

"I'm not sure, but I'm staying with you guys until you're back home."

"That's a relief," I could see his chest heave out a sigh, "I don't want to deal with those

monsters

anymore."

"You shouldn't have to, since I'm the one that's going to take care of you and your brothers. Just let me know if you need anything specific and I'll do what I can to make sure it happens," I began to step away from him, letting him rest on his chosen branch.

"Better food."

"That should be fixed by the time you're hungry."

"Then that's all I have to say!" His tone shifted up, ending in a laugh as he curled away from me. I gave a farewell wave before leaving his enclosure,

locking the door and proceeding to the next one.

Pushing the door closed behind me, I took a studious look at the scenery. There were barely any standing 'trees', but there were a lot of grounded branches and splintered trees that mimicked a field.

"...go away."

I looked around to find the voice, seeing slight movement behind one of the logs before following the movement to see a pair of dark eyes nearly blending into the substrate and log next to them.

"I'm just here to make sure that you're okay," I didn't call out a name, unsure if this was Ichi or Todo, "I've already seen Jyushi and Kara."

"I'm fine. Go away," The command was repeated with force.

"I know that we didn't start off meeting each other the proper way, but I want to remedy that," I shifted over a little, getting more of a view of the naga hunkered down behind the log. The pale lavender scales stood out like a sore thumb among the brown and tan substrate, the coloring, or morph, not very viable for camouflage in the wild.

"You took us from our home. I don't want to know you," Ichi growled, his mouth slightly parting to hiss.

"I'm sorry about that," I winced at my own words, quickly thinking of another way to sound sincere about my mistake, "I saw Jyushi's track back on the island and I got carried away with what I was doing. If I had known that my curiosity would've led to this, then I wouldn't have done it. You and your brothers deserve to be left alone."

I sat down heavily, leaning against the back wall and staring straight at the rotting log in front of me. I didn't want Ichi to think that I was any kind of threat and tried to prove it through my body language.

"Will you put us back, then?" His voice sounded a little closer.

"I want to bring you back to your island. I don't want to interfere with your lives, as it was never my intention to."

"I don't believe you."

I felt him hit me before I knew what happened, a searing pain blooming in my right arm before I was pushed along the ground, feeling his coils squeeze against my legs. Stifling a cry, I only looked down at him to see his jaws locked onto my forearm as his dark eyes glared into my own. His three rows of teeth acted as half-inch-long daggers, gripping my forearm tightly and painfully.

"You don't need to believe me, Ichi," I pushed past the pain, moving my other hand to gently caress the top of his head and running my fingers through his lavender-colored hair, "You can hate me the whole time you're here but I give you my word, or whatever else you want from me, that I'm going to bring you back home safely."

The glare in his eyes faltered as he released my arm, never breaking eye contact until he moved a few feet away from me. I lay where he dumped me, feeling his lower half uncoil from me and shift back underneath him.

"...fine," Ichi turned away, swiftly moving behind a few of the logs and pressing himself down out of sight. When he was silent after that, I gently stood up and went through the doorway, locking it behind me and rushing to the sink nearby. Running cold water over Ichi's bite, I rubbed against the bite lightly with a hand towel to wash off the blood before hovering around the sink, looking for some anti-bacterial first aid. Not seeing anything nearby, I pressed harder on the wound before using a little bit of hand soap to clean the area completely.

"Dammit..."

After washing the area a few times, I dried off my forearm and walked over to the closet bedroom. Digging through my bag, I found my emergency first-aid kit and pulled out the gauze roll, twisting it around my forearm before pinning it closed. I was gonna get questions from the other nagas, but there wasn't anything I could really do about that...

I'd have to keep an eye on Ichi whenever I was in the enclosure with him. The only saving grace was that he was a corn snake naga, completely non-venomous, and I was an idiot thinking that I'd be all right because of that.

"You're hurt," I heard behind me as I closed the next enclosure's door, turning to see Todo slightly leaning to look around me as his dark eyes looked at my wrapped forearm.

"Yeah, let down my guard too early," I fully faced him, watching as the naga pulled away from me.

His enclosure was like stepping into a giant's forest, with wide tree bases near the corners of the enclosure and lots of hiding spaces crafted into their sides. Flora was scattered everywhere, creating a thick underbrush that was hard to see through.

"That's what you get for treating him like a baby," Todo glanced behind him, a smirk resting on his lips.

"I didn't treat him any differently," I lowered my gaze, watching the naga easily climb one of the trunks and wrap himself around a thin extension of branch, his pink scales vivid against the brown and green, "I only apologized for what I had done to make this all happen."

"Have you ever stopped to think that maybe you never saw some of my brothers because they didn't want you to find them?" He turned his human half around, resting his back against the branch, "Have you ever thought that you weren't the first one to step foot on the island?"

"I was only told that your home was uncharted and untouched by civilization when I signed up for the job," I looked up towards the naga, "It would have to be discovered by someone in order for it to be considered 'uncharted'."

"And maybe that team found Ichi first, mistreated him and betrayed his trust, just like you've already done."

"Jyushi didn't say anything about that."

"It's possible that Jyushi didn't

know

," Todo twisted back to rest on his stomach, crossing his arms and propping up his chin on them, "For a scientist, you're pretty dumb."

"I get it," I put both hands in the air in exasperation, "You have a grudge against me, and just want me to get my comeuppance from your brothers. Sweet, poetic justice. 'How dare I rip you from your happy home and shove you into a place that's far too small', or 'I'm going to reap what I sow'. Does that sound about right?"

"Give or take a few words," The smug smile returned to his lips, "Yeah."

"Fine," I moved towards the door, "I'll bring you better food, and interact with you less so my bad karma doesn't bleed over to you."

"That's a good start,

human

."

I closed the door behind me, taking deep breaths to keep from yelling out in aggravation. It was only the second time meeting each other, and I could already tell that Todo was the brat of the group. He probably wouldn't lay off until I was able to have them brought back to their island, and even then would probably make the trip unbearable for me.

"(Y/n)," A voice jolted me from my thoughts, "You're agitated."

I looked up, startled to find myself in the second-to-last enclosure, the door already closed behind me and standing in the middle of a rainforest with the large trees nearly identical to the ones in Kara's enclosure. The wet humidity was nearly stifling, making my hair feel thick and my lungs struggle for a deep breath. I was standing near the edge of a large water fixture, a bright red tail curled just before my feet while the red headed naga

looked at me from just above the water's surface, most of his body completely submerged.

"Oso..." I shook my head to clear it, taking a few steps back from the lounging naga's tail after realizing that I almost stepped on it. I couldn't take another bite, especially one from Oso, "I'm sorry, clearly distracted in the most dangerous place."

He shifted in the soaking pond that was built to split his enclosure in two, the water attraction acting like a river, curling his tail a little before looking back at me. Completely moving freely in the water, Oso rested his arms against the embankment.

"What's got you so distracted?"

"Too many things going wrong and not enough going right," I sighed as I squatted down, watching his eyes lock onto my wrapped forearm.

"...and what's going right for you?" He tore his gaze away, shifting back to look at my face as his tongue flicked out.

"I'm alive," I started to question if that was a positive thing.

"You don't sound so sure about that."

"It's because I'm not," My colored hues met his red orbs, "I had a golden opportunity fall into my lap because of all the hard work I'd done over the past few years. When I got the briefing and heard about the chance I was given to extend humanity's knowledge about your unknown island, I was all rearing and ready to go," I held my head between my hands, propping my elbows up with my folded knees, "Two days into the expedition, Jyushi found me and the rest is what you know...I was supposed to be there for six months, report my findings to the relieving crew, and go back home for some rest. Instead..."

I shut my mouth, realizing I was about to get Oso and I into trouble.

"Instead, you're here and not doing what you've clearly trained to do," Oso finished the sentence for me, making me look up as his hand rested on my wrapped forearm. I could only nod as he moved closer, the water dripping down his damaged skin and scales, "I'm happy that you're not like the other humans we've seen so far. In fact, I'd say that if we were back at our island, my brothers and I would have some fun with you around."

Oso leaned in closer, gently holding my forearm and pulling it away to expose more of my face. I didn't fight the feeling of my cheeks growing warmer as he pushed himself closer until our heads were next to each other, his lips next to my left ear.

"It's too bad that I hold onto my grudges tightly."

Chapter 10

"It's too bad that I hold onto my grudges tightly."

I stilled, feeling the blood in my face drain quickly as Oso slowly pulled away from me, his red eyes no longer holding the playfulness from earlier. His black pupils were thin, barely fluctuating as he regarded me with hostility, seeing me as something that had brought disaster to his own.

"Tell me what I can do to remove your grudges..." Staying completely still, I watched as he retreated further from me and sunk back into the river, fully submerging for a moment before resting his head and arms on the far bank.

"You've already talked to four of my brothers, and you still need an answer?" His mouth was hidden by his folded arms in front of his face, but I could hear the slight 'pop' his jaw made.

"Then I'll need time," I stood up, my mind racing through everything that I needed to do, "It's not going to be tomorrow, but I'll do what I can as quickly as I'm able."

Oso lifted his head up a little, a small smirk on his lips.

"That's fine with me. Go check on Choro...make sure his shed isn't stuck," He tilted his head towards the last enclosure, not moving from his position as I walked away.

Taking a deep breath to reset myself after closing Oso's door, I looked towards the employee entrance of the last enclosure and stepped inside before shutting it behind me.

A lush jungle filled the enclosure, covering the ceiling with thick leaves that shadowed the understory and sealed in some humidity, creating a near perfect replica of the jungle part of the island they were living on. Making my way through the open footpath of the bushes, I spied a water feature near the back of the enclosure, but a quick glance told me that it was empty

of a green naga. Continuing through to where the soaking pond drained into the rest of the enclosure, I withdrew my foot from stepping on a downed green vine and closely inspected it to see no scales along its visible length.

A green mamba in shed...

I swallowed hard. Considering that I'd only 'met' Choro twice, I didn't know much about what his personality was, what set him off or what calmed him down, or anything I could say or do to keep myself from being bitten. All I had to rely on was my herpetology knowledge, and that seemed to only get me so far when the snakes that I was dealing with had the same intelligence as any other human I was around.

The positive: they'd actually be able to tell me what was going on if they ever grew sick or restless, and I'd be able to clearly communicate whatever I was going to have to do to them in regards to shots or health checks.

The negative...half of them were venomous and the other half could kill me by constriction.

"(Y/n)...?"

I froze in a straddled state over the 'river', hearing the voice from right above me.

Shit...

"Choro," I looked upwards to see the green haired naga staring down at me, his human half dropping closer as I continued to watch, "I, uh...I was looking for you."

My legs cried out for relief, but I pushed past the muscle complaints as Choro came closer to my face, his arms reaching down and ghosting over my head and neck. The heat radiated from his palms before I realized he grabbed me from underneath each arm and pulled me upwards. I swallowed a scream as I let my legs go limp, finding myself moved back over the footpath and lowered to the ground, gathering my feet under me.

"Did I go somewhere?" Choro asked as he slid down next to me, slightly wincing as his larger coils moved from the tree he was hanging off of to the ground.

"No, but I wanted to make sure that they...got you in here gently," I stepped away from his coils, noticing the green was much paler than it was yesterday. He was probably a day or two away from shedding his skin.

"I don't remember," He raised a hand to his chin, "I woke up and I was already in here without those...metal vines or the face covering."

A look of sudden realization passed over his face before Choro turned towards me.

"What about you? They dragged you out of the thing I was in when the shaking stopped, but you were still asleep."

I thought for a moment, remembering that I was darted in Choro's transport container. I guess they left me in there the whole flight back. No wonder my body was sore when I woke up.

"I'm doing much better now," Putting on a genuine smile on my face, I slightly flinched when I felt his forked tongue flicker across my right arm before I watched as he gently lifted the forearm up to his face, "That's...nothing to be worried over. It was my own mistake."

"Ichi," Choro's eyelids lowered, as if in disapproval of something, "and someone else."

I paused, thinking back to whoever touched my arm before I realized that Choro was picking up one of the men that had escorted me down here.

"Yeah...you may smell him on me from time to time," I winced as Choro played with the gauze wrapping, messing with the prongs holding it closed, "Ah, you don't want to do that..."

"Why?" He looked back at me with the same curious look that Jyushi gave me on the island.

"The wrapping is meant to keep harmful bacteria and other things from touching the injury, and it needs to stay on for a little bit longer," Carefully pulling my arm from his hands, I pinned the gauze back closed.

"All right," Choro sat back on one of his coils, "I didn't smell anything off with it, so I think you'll be okay."

A muffled yelling caught both of our attention, drawing our eyes towards the door to Choro's enclosure. I rushed to the door, closely followed by the green naga, a dangerous mixture of curiosity and anxiety.

Pulling open the door, I motioned for Choro to stay inside before lightly closing and locking it, seeing an all-too familiar face stalk around the kitchen area.

"Karl!" I couldn't tell if I was yelling at him in anger or surprise.

His medium-length blond hair bounced a little as he looked towards me, the beard he was starting to show on the island was now almost evenly spread around his jaw. The dark blue eyes hardened as they landed on my advancing form, the neutral look shifting quickly into a scowl.

"What the fuck were you doing?" He bit out every word, slamming a hand down on the prep table.

"I was getting the nagas accommodated, just like I was told to," I lifted an index finger into his face as I stood mere inches away from him, not even hiding the heat in my voice, "My question to you is what the fuck were you planning on doing to these nagas?!"

Karl swatted my hand out of his face, gritting his teeth in a scowl.

"Just what you see here," His eyes narrowed, "They were the reason I signed up for the mission."

"You're just as bad as the rest of them..." I ignored the stinging in my hand from his swat, "I intend to bring them back, to let them be where they need to be...not paraded around as some kind of

freak.

"

"Wake up, sweetheart," He scoffed and walked towards the large refrigerator, pulling the doors open to examine the inner contents, "Money makes the world go 'round, and science just needs to shut up and sit in the backseat."

"Money, huh? Just how much were you paid to try to find them?"

"Twenty thousand per head."

"...no wonder they hid from you," I folded my arms across my chest, keeping the prep table between him and I.

"No wonder they showed themselves to you," Karl countered as he pulled out a bottle of water, "Boss said that the trick to bring out monsters is to offer a virgin sacrifice. You signed up and, not even a week later, we've got six nagas locked away."

My tongue tripped over several choice words as I felt adrenaline rush through my body, hotwiring every nerve and overheating my skin.

"If you came to pester me or to gloat over your small victory, good for you. Now get the fuck out of my home!"

"Neither, actually," Karl took a long swing, a smile crossing his face after he set the half-empty bottle down, "Boss wanted me to pass on a message."

I held back a retort.

"Two things he wanted me to say, really..." He counted the number out on his fingers with each message he relayed, "One, all of the exhibits are opening tomorrow, regardless of how the nagas look. Claims that scars draw more attention or something...and two, he has all rights to any children you decide to father from the nagas."

"E-fucking-xcuse me?!" I screeched, clinging to the lip of the table like it was my only lifeline from punching Karl in the face.

"His words, not mine," His dark blue hues settled on my angered form, "And I just wanted to let you know that if their hemipenes aren't enough for you, I've got a good set all ready to go."

I rounded the table corner before I could give it a second thought, reaching out and connecting a closed right hook into the bottom of his left jaw, knocking him off balance. Following up the punch with a left hook, I clenched my teeth as he caught the throw, pulling me down with him onto the ground and grabbing my throat with his free hand.

"So feisty!" He laughed a little as I struggled to lay a finger on his skin, using my own left arm to block my wild punches while tightening his grip on my throat a little, "Normally, I like my women to be a little more submissive, but I don't mind a good tussle every now and then."

Shoving myself off of the man and staggering back, I raised a hand to run through my disheveled hair, glaring down at him the entire time.

"I'm no whore, nor will I be breeding the nagas...Get out of my home before I unlock the enclosures!" My voice sounded tense, and I held back from crying as much as I could until I watched the elevator doors close behind a laughing and amused Karl. Seeing the car light of the elevator pull upwards, I hiccuped and ran towards the first enclosure closest to me.

I didn't care that they weren't fully human.

They were more human than those around me.

I heard my name cheerfully called out before I ran into the naga, wrapping my arms around his torso and letting my tears flow. He partially returned the hug with one arm before I felt myself be lifted off the ground, settling against the naga's chest as he moved both of us into a lazy circle of his coils.

The yellow scales were hard to see through the tears.

Chapter 11

The exhibit had opened against my well wishes for the nagas.

I was forced to stay in the back area while the zoo was open, waiting in near agony as I could imagine the gawking children and skeptical adults staring into the enclosures while the nagas remained unaware that they were being watched. I had warned them all that there could be some noise, since I knew that children and most teenagers tended to ignore the written rules that warned them to not tap on the glass or use the flash on their cameras. Frustrated by my lack of wandering area, I spent most of the open hours pouring through my field journal to try and see if anything was taken from it, modified, or added. A small sense of relief soothed my mind when I found it to be in the same shape that I had left it, despite some of the pages showing signs of use by a small tear or curling.

The nagas and I had discovered that the employee doors were thin enough to talk through, and when they weren't sleeping or exploring their enclosure, most of the nagas wanted to talk.

Ichi hadn't responded to any of my questions, so I had left him alone. I'd rather not make our relationship any worse than it already was.

Glancing at a wall clock to see that the zoo was only open for another two hours, I stood up from the door leading to Todo's enclosure. While he still considered me a 'bad luck charm' and a 'lower life form', I was more interested in learning about what kind of snake he was based on, tolerating verbal jabs at my character while getting some useful information.

He had spoken about life on the island before the 'disgusting humans' invaded and decided to move in, wrecking havoc while setting up weird boxes and stick-like contraptions. Todo clarified that each brother had a territory on the island, dividing it up amongst themselves and picking areas that suited their needs better. Pridefully bragging about his own little corner

of paradise, I determined that the enclosures were built with the snake in mind and not the nagas.

Todo preferred a damp wetland, loving to burrow in the loose ground and hunting by ambush. Kara and Choro almost loved the same scenery, using the dense tree cover to catch their prey and rarely coming to the ground except to find water during the dry season. Jyushi was an expert climber, but preferred to live in the wetlands where he could swim and hunt without worry of missing a strike or falling from a tree. Oso and Ichi were primarily groundwellers, only climbing when it was necessary and claiming the flatlands of the island from themselves.

A tone announced the arrival of the elevator, the doors opening to reveal Karl walking in with two other men.

I quickly shut the field journal, trying to discreetly move towards Oso's enclosure right next to Todo's and kept a hand on the locking mechanism. If he was going to try anything again, I wasn't going to give him a warning this time.

His face twisted into amusement before turning towards the two men, "The delivery area for the larger meats is here. The keeper will tell you exactly where to put the orders, and will take care of putting it away."

The two unknown men looked over at me before looking back at Karl. He moved towards the kitchen and continued to direct the food delivery men of what meats came in at what time, finally turning towards me and waving a hand to direct me closer. I didn't move from my spot.

"How often will you be coming?" I asked from where I stood.

"There'll be a delivery every two weeks with what the animals need," One of the men responded, moving his hand to scratch behind his head, "It's already added on to what the zoo requires for the rest of their exhibits."

"That should be fine."

"Your keycards should be updated with the code needed to unlock the elevator," Karl walked them back to the elevator and bid them farewell as the deliverymen used the elevator. My hand tightened on the handle as Karl turned back towards me.

"Ah, ah," I chided him like a child.

"I told you that I don't mind a good tussle every now and then," He didn't move from his position, only tossed his head to the side to remove the hair covering some of his forehead, "Boss says 'food will be coming in two days with the delivery that the zoo orders'. You'll be given some good cuts of horse and cow, and it'll be the same delivery each time."

"That's fine," I didn't remove my hand from the handle and clenched the field journal tighter in frustration that he wasn't leaving, "Anything else?"

"Not particularly," Karl shook his head and slid his hands into his jean pockets, "Just wondering how long you're going to last with that much tension in your body. You do know that the nagas are staying here for half a year, right?"

My face paled, and I tightened my jaw.

"No. No one tells me anything despite me being in charge of the 'exotics'," My voice sounded tense.

"Well, you're gonna have to relax before you burn out. Boss is thinking that the next move should be Chicago or someplace else in the Midwest," Karl shrugged and turned back towards the elevator, swiping his card against the keypad, "Hey, isn't that in the opposite direction of their home?"

I narrowed my eyes into a glare, staring at his back as the elevator doors closed behind him and ascended, leaving me alone once more in the back area.

The two days passed slowly, but I busied myself as soon as the meat was delivered. The cuts were definitely nicer than the previous food and I set about slicing them up into swallowable chunks, or rather...made them more presentable to the human spectators. It would either drive away the crowds if they swallowed an entire leg whole, or it would bring in more crowds. Who knew what people considered 'entertainment' nowadays.

I dropped each large portion into its own food bucket, hauling the first heavy thing towards Jyushi's enclosure. I didn't know what Calmine or the zoo advertised for the public feeding, but I was going to do it in the order their enclosure was in.

Opening the first door on the right, I heaved the bucket in before me and waddled with the food towards the middle of the enclosure, right in view of the big black observation window. I heard the large naga before I saw him, his white-and-yellow head dropping down in front of me and sniffing the bucket with scrutiny.

"It's all yours, so no need to worry about saving some for your brothers," I took a step back, leaving the bucket on the ground as Jyushi effortlessly picked it up, smelling the handle, the bucket, then the meat inside. His tongue paused in its flicking pattern before he turned to me with a large smile.

"It smells much better than last time," Jyushi grabbed a handful of meat and shoved it into his mouth. I noticed that the skin around his lips had parted back even further, marking the actual end of his mouth somewhere near his ears, "...and it tastes better, too! Thanks, (y/n)!"

"You're welcome," I returned the smile after shaking off my fascination at the new discovery, "They said they'd give me fresher cuts, and I was able to use some nutritional powder from the kitchen stock."

Another hand dove into the bucket and pulled out more meat.

"Did you want any?" Jyushi held out a few smaller cuts towards me, swallowing what was in his mouth.

"No," I waved both hands in front of my face, "Like I said, everything in there is for you. I have to go feed the others, so just leave the empty bucket by the door and I'll pick it up later."

A look passed over Jyushi's face, quickly surrounding me with a single large coil.

"Jyu-"

"Are you okay?" His voice was softer, "I meant to ask that earlier, but it slipped my mind. When you ran in here a few days ago, I was wondering if my brothers did anything to you...especially with the thing around your arm."

"Oh..." I lowered my eyes before shaking my head, "No, it wasn't your brothers that hurt me. It was...someone else. They made me feel small and unimportant, so I just wanted to get away from them."

"Did they hurt your arm?"

"No, they...they hurt me with their words," I covered my heart with a hand, "I'm not letting what they said bother me anymore, so I'm okay."

Jyushi's face spread into a bloody smile, "That's good. If that person hurts you again, I don't mind if you come to me for another hug..."

"If it happens again, I'll come running to you," I gave him an affirmative nod, watching him turn his attention back to the bucket and letting me crawl over the barrier coil. Closing the door behind me, I made my way back to the prep table and grabbed the next bucket, hauling it towards Kara's enclosure.

"Kara, I've got food for you," I called out as soon as I set one foot into his enclosure, announcing my presence and hopefully dissuading any surprise attack. Walking down the footpath that I had partially carved out, I brought the bucket into a viewable area from the black window again. An exhaled breath sounded out behind me, the air partially hitting the back of my neck

before I felt a weight on my left shoulder. The teal-blue colored hair caught my eye first, laughing a little as Kara's coppery eyes looked up at me.

"You goof, go eat."

"It smells much better than last time," He gave a small laugh before pulling away from my shoulder, his tail brushing up against my left calf and partially curling around it as he bent down to pick up the bucket, "Did you do something to it?"

"Not much, really. Just added some powder that would get some much needed nutrients into you, since you probably had a much different diet than just red meat," I rested a hand against my hip, shifting my weight to the side as I adjusted my stance to accommodate Kara's tail gripping my calf and ankle.

"Birds were more of my preference, but nothing this large in one sitting," Kara reached into the bucket and dug down deep, pulling out a larger chunk, "This would be about the right size for me."

"Oh, did I cut the others too small?"

"No, no! Not at all," Kara looked back at me, shaking his head, "I'm just showing you what I was able to grab in a day. At my size, it took a lot of energy just to hunt for something like this, so seeing this large...thing full of them is like a banquet to me."

"Well, this should last you for the week," I wiggled my leg a little to loosen the coil around it, stepping out when I had enough room, "Everything in there is for you, and I have plenty of food for the rest of your clutchmates."

"Oh, (y/n)."

The tone in Kara's voice made me pause in leaving, turning around to see him make direct eye contact with me.

"Be careful with Choro today."

"The shed...I will," I gave him a reaffirming smile before leaving the enclosure, catching my breath from the change in humidity and grabbing the next bucket for Ichi. Taking in a deep breath to calm down, I opened the door to his enclosure and walked along the back wall, setting the bucket down near the corner where there was a medium-sized running pond.

"The food in the bucket is for you and you can eat as much as you want. After you're finished, put it by the door and I'll grab it later."

Moving out of the enclosure, I sighed as I locked the door. I had to figure out a way to break the tension between Ichi and I, especially if he was going to trust me with getting him out of here. Subconsciously rubbing the bite mark on my right forearm, I felt the small scabs forming along my skin underneath the long sleeve of the shirt, creating two half-ovals on the top of my arm with another half oval on the underside.

I would have to figure that out sooner rather than later, shaking my head to clear the frustration as I grabbed the fourth bucket and headed towards Todo's enclosure.

"You better have made sure that it tastes perfect," He levelled a haughty look towards me, his coils partially embedded in the dirt substrate.

"I can't eat raw meat like you can," I set the bucket down near him before I heard him clear his throat, looking up to see Todo motion for the bucket to be picked up, "Excuse me?"

"You expect me to eat my food from the ground?" He raised an eyebrow, a look of shock and disgust crossing his face as he pressed a splayed hand across his chest.

"How else did you do it on your island?" I didn't move to pick up the bucket, levelling a partially frustrated look at the suddenly picky naga.

"Not like a barbarian," Todo waved his hand towards the bucket again, the motion more exaggerated this time, "You're going to feed it to me."

"No, I'm not," I crossed my arms over my chest, "I've got two other nagas to feed, and no one else has had a problem feeding from the bucket."

"Well, I do."

"Clearly," I began to turn away, intending to leave and continue the feeding process until I felt Todo's hand clamping down on my shoulder.

"I thought I was pretty clear about what I think of you,

human

," Todo's voice deepened.

"And I thought that I made my counter just as clear," I looked over my shoulder at him, the pink dots in his hair catching the light, "I was to interact with you less, only being near you when there was food so that my bad karma wouldn't cling to you."

"Well, I changed my mind," Todo's black scale mask had a light film over the scales, his black eyes a little paler.

"Oh, Todo," I chided, "Don't tell me that you have a personality change

when you're in shed...

"

He pulled back with a shocked look on his face, his expressions much more pronounced than the previous few days. I gave him a coy smile before it shifted into a genuine one.

"Don't worry. I won't tell the others. Just eat the meat in the bucket, and I'll be back to help you find a good place to rest in," Closing the door behind me, I laughed into my hands to keep the nagas from hearing.

It was too amusing for me; the naga that had wished my death at the hands of his brothers turned into a childish naga that demanded my attention while he was in shed. It was too adorable.

With the laughter finally out of my system, I grabbed another bucket and shook it a little to prevent the meat from settling at the bottom. I only had one more naga to feed before I came to the current problem child...the naga notorious for his bad attitude while he was shedding, and prone to having frequent stuck sheds.

Chapter 12

"Heading to Choro next?" Oso asked when he took the bucket from my hands, lounging back onto his coils as the tip of his tail wrapped around my right ankle. I had woken him up from a nap when I entered the enclosure, letting him awaken more before holding the meat out to him.

"Yeah, he's the last one."

"Hmm," He dug into the bucket to grab one of the bigger pieces, "This'll be the first shed that you'll go through with us, so I'm just going to give you a hint: don't make any sudden moves."

"I had figured," I raised a hand up to my neck and rubbed the back of it, "The snake that we're used to can be just as temperamental during shedding, so I was going to be cautious regardless. A bite from any of you can kill me."

"Except Ichi."

I shifted my eyes to look at Oso's own, his black-and-red hues staring back at me. Lowering my gaze, I nodded. Of course Oso knew who had bitten me, and he had probably known as soon as I stepped into the enclosure two days ago. In fact, the other nagas may have already known but never voiced it.

"Well, technically all of you can kill me. Jyushi and Ichi by constriction, Todo by suffocation, and you, Kara, and Choro by your venom," I met his gaze once more, "To be honest, I'm terrified of all of you."

"Yet, you're still here with us. Checking on us every day and even stepping into these small areas to feed us," Oso hooded his eyes as he swallowed a meat chunk for emphasis, "So, what's really going on?"

I stilled, "...what do you mean?"

"The voices from beyond the black wall are faint, but I can still hear them. They sound just like you do when you speak, so I figured they were more humans," His eyes never left my face, "They can see where my brothers are, but we can't see each other. So tell me, (y/n)..."

He dropped the half-full bucket and wrapped his tail around my legs, rearing his human half above my head as his jaw opened to reveal his elongated fangs hidden behind his lips.

"If you're so terrified of us, why are you still here when you could be beyond that wall?"

"Because I convinced the men who took you to take me, too," I spat out the lie quickly, "I didn't want to leave you all alone, so I told them to take me with you so there could be someone you were familiar with."

The answer seemed to give Oso pause, his already loose coils shifting away from me before turning his full attention back to the food and finishing it in a few swallows. The silence between him and I grew thick, broken only by the soft mummerings of the people watching the interaction.

"So that's why," Oso stated when he was done thinking something through, looking back at me with a smile on his face as he held out the empty bucket, "Sorry about that, (y/n), and thanks for the meal. It was much better than the first one."

I was stunned, partially startled at the sudden turn in attitude of the naga as I took the bucket from him, "Oso...?"

"I'd go check on Choro before you get distracted by talking to me," He glanced over his shoulder as he started to slip into the soaking pond, "Just remember my hint and you should be fine."

A small frown settled on my lips before I walked out of the enclosure, tossing the empty bucket into the sink before looking at the last remaining bucket. If Choro was in shed, then giving him food right now wouldn't be a good thing. I shoved the bucket back into the fridge after making space,

thinking of who I could give the extra portion to before laying my hand on the locking mechanism of Choro's enclosure.

With a heavy 'thunk', the lock disengaged and the door slowly opened to let the heavy humidity roll over me in waves, withholding the urge to gag at the unpleasant feeling.

"Choro, I'm coming in," I called out before closing the door behind me, leaving it unlocked for a quick escape if I was able to run from the pissed off naga.

I got a hiss in reply.

Uh-oh...

"I don't have any food with me," I slowly walked down the footpath, taking it one step at a time while looking all around me for the naga, "I just wanted to see if I'd be able to help you out at all."

I froze when I locked eyes with the dark green eyes of Choro almost directly above me, his entire body tense and poised to strike. Most of his body was dull in color, but his hair and eyes retained their shades of green. The scales along his back and waist had already peeled off, hanging from his body like discarded clothing.

His black pupils were wide, almost completely encompassing the deep green irises. I swallowed whatever saliva was in my mouth, realizing that he was eyeing me as a threat.

"Choro...didn't you want to soak?" I kept my body rigid, my mouth barely moving as the words passed through my lips, "That's what the river is for."

"...not deep enough..." The words were uttered in a dark tone, as if he hated to speak.

"I'm sure we can find a deep enough place for you," I softly spoke, "I can carry you if you want."

"...no," Choro frowned and lowered himself in front of me, revealing more of the patchy shed along his back and tail. I slightly frowned at the large swatches of dead skin and chitin, before stilling as Choro moved closer to me, "...you're afraid."

"I may be afraid, but I really don't want to do anything that would make you scared of me," I kept eye contact with the green naga, only moving my head to keep our eyes on each other.

Choro didn't say anything before turning away and slithering towards the 'river' in the middle of his enclosure, sliding into it slowly as the water level was enough to cover the height of his tail.

"Is it too shallow for you?" I followed at a distance, mentally taking notes as I watched him move. The stuck shed wasn't located in impossible-to-reach places, but I could see that I would have to help out in the future sheds.

"I just want deeper water..." His voice sounded less tense, as if the cool water was relaxing him, "It's not bad...just not enough."

"All right," I slowly knelt next to the 'river' and reached into the waters, rolling up my sleeve to keep it from getting wet. I felt around for the bottom of it, my fingers brushing against the rocky debris as the water level reached just before my shoulder, "I can see about removing the rocks near the bottom. It should give you another foot or so of depth. Would that be all right?"

"That'll be-"

A loud 'thud' sounded against the black wall, making me jump in shock as Choro's form suddenly tensed up, his eyes locked onto my movement. I pulled my arm out of the water just as Choro lunged, the sound setting off a terrible domino effect.

Putting my hands in front of me while shifting onto my back, I grabbed onto Choro's shoulders and halted his sudden advance while his momentum pushed us against the ground, the dirt and rocks hidden within the substrate

scraping against my back and hips. His hands clamped down onto my forearms, the sharp nails digging into the skin as his fangs completely unfolded from their resting place. My face and torso were out of his range, but both of my arms were completely within reach if he moved his head to either side.

"Choro, stop!" The cry was ripped from my throat as my voice shook in fear, tears streaming down from my right eye as I struggled to roll out from the pinned position I was in, holding up the human half of the naga while his hands pushed down against my arms to try and attack me.

It was a few seconds before he pulled away, breathing heavily as his fangs folded back into his mouth.

"(Y/n)...I'm so sorry...!" He curled his head away from me, leaving me laying on the ground in shock. My arms felt heavy as they lay next to me, probably bruised from the sudden strain of keeping a venomous naga at bay. I slowly got up, my eyes flicking over towards the viewing window before looking at Choro.

The green mamba naga had curled into a loose ball, his human half hidden under the multitude of coils that shifted with each breath he took.

"It wasn't your fault, Choro..." I rubbed my hands, glancing over my arms to see if there was any damage to them. The nail marks would heal in a day or two, much more shallow than the bite marks from Ichi, "I shouldn't have been in that position in the first place...not while you were in such a tense mood."

"...what was that noise?" Choro's strained voice was partially muffled, his exhales coming out as small hisses.

"I'm...not completely sure. Whatever it was had bad timing."

Or great timing, if the immature culprit wanted to see some action,

I stood up after rolling down the one sleeve, "I'm going to see if everything's okay, so just relax and keep soaking."

"(Y/n)," His voice sounded like a whine, "I almost killed you."

"Yeah, you did," I wasn't going to make an excuse for what happened, "but you pulled yourself away before anything could happen. For a terrified human, I think I held my own pretty well against you."

"You're...not mad...?"

"The only thing I'm mad at is whatever made that noise," I moved towards the door, "I'll go figure out what happened and make sure it doesn't happen again."

"...okay..." Choro's voice grew quieter as I closed and locked the door behind me, the elevator tone announcing its arrival as I stood in front of Choro's door, arms folded over my chest.

The elevator doors opened to reveal a team of three zoo security personnel, two of which were armed with rifles. I narrowed my eyes as they seemed shocked to see me alive and standing. I knew why they were here, and it was something I never wanted to encounter.

An animal had attacked someone within its enclosure, and that animal usually ended up dead afterwards.

"You can turn yourselves right around and find whoever set the naga off," I tensed up my voice, sounding as stern as I possibly could.

"That's none of your concern," One of the personnel with a rifle motioned for me to leave the door, "We need to determine if the animal is safe enough."

"Choro is fine," I stood my ground, "One of the feeding observers had either thrown something or hit the viewing glass with their fist, which caused whatever was reported to you. I haven't been bitten or injured in any way, and I'd like it if you scooted your butts back into the elevator and not stressed out my charges even more than they need to be."

"That's not what I heard..." One of the security guards muttered before another talked over him.

"You're to let us do our job. We need to make sure that the animal is safe enough to keep here, and to ensure that it won't be in a position to act out again," He motioned again for me to move away from the door.

I furrowed my brow in anger.

"

I

am their keeper, and

I do not give you clearance

to enter their enclosures."

"(Y/n), I'd just let them do their job, if I were you," Karl stepped out from behind the armored security personnel, "I saw what happened myself: the monster tried to attack you when you were in a weak position while checking its water."

My eyes went wide before they narrowed, throwing death glares at the man while clenching my fists.

"Would you care to double check the security footage from outside the enclosure?" I laced the question with as much venom as I could muster, "I'm sure that it'll show

someone

banging against the window, making me react in the way I did."

"Just let us see the animal for ourselves," One of the security sounded exasperated.

"No," I leveled the glare at them, "I'm keeping you out of Choro's enclosure for your safety. If you want to incur an actual attack from him, charging in with rifles aimed to kill is a surefire way to do it. If you want to stay alive and not suffer a slow and painful death from his venom, then don't shove me out of the way and open the door."

The looks on their faces shifted a little, becoming slightly unsure from their determined looks previously.

"Go find someone else's charge to mess with," I leaned against the locked door, my arms still folded across my chest, "I'm sure the media would love to write about the next Harambe or Tatiana from San Diego Zoo."

The security looked distracted as something was called over the radio earpieces they had, lowering their rifles and moving back towards the elevators.

Karl stayed behind.

Chapter 13

"You can leave, too."

Karl gave a breathy laugh, moving towards the kitchen area and opening the fridge. I didn't move from Choro's locked door as I watched him haul out the bucket still full of food, putting it on top of the metal prep table and glancing over at me.

"Holding out on them?"

"You can

leave

," I repeated with force, reaching back towards the door lever. I knew that Choro wasn't going to be in the mindset to attack anymore, but I was hoping that Karl wouldn't come to that conclusion.

"Do that, and you're going to be in the news as a terrible keeper," A confident smile crossed his lips, "Plus, wasn't there a small clause that you agreed to with Calmine?"

"Better open a more venomous naga's cage, then," I didn't break eye contact with him as I moved towards Oso's door.

It was a move he was apparently waiting for.

Karl grabbed a fistful of cut meat and threw it at me, my arms instinctively covering my head from the bacterial projectiles and turning away from him. Hearing his footfalls coming closer, I booked it towards Oso's door.

I managed to get a finger on it before Karl grabbed me from behind and pulled me away from the door, the lever pulling down a little. Fully turning my attention to Karl, I threw my right elbow into his face and felt something shift from the hit. With a groan, he pushed me to the ground and

immediately used his body weight to keep me from getting up. A hand flew up to his nose before his eyes locked onto mine, full of fury.

"Fucking bitch...!"

I pushed off his hands as he tried to grab at my clothing, fear replacing the fading anger in my system as Karl weaved one hand through my hair and twisted the other around the loosened collar of my shirt.

"Let go of me!" I screamed, the shirt tightening around my neck as I realized he was starting to drag me towards one of the repurposed rooms. It was a small storage closet that had been completely emptied out, a free room for me to 'decorate' however I wished.

"You owe me...so much..." Karl's voice was strained, "The least you could do is just fucking take the hint."

"I don't owe you anything!" I hooked a foot around one of the legs of the prep table as I was dragged past it, the bolted down table keeping me from moving with him, "You're nothing but an asshole that thinks he can throw around his weight because I'm kept here as leverage!"

"You're only here because those monsters listen to you!" He yelled back, twisting the hand in my hair more to try and get me to let go of the table, "Calmine should've left you back on that island, alone and without help."

"They're not the monsters here," A cry tore from my throat, feeling a button snap off from the stressed fabric of my shirt, "You are!"

I stilled for a moment, hearing someone else's voice join my own in the accusation before seeing a wall of yellow and white scales roll across my field of vision, a slight tug on my hair before I was fully released. Rolling onto my stomach, I looked up to see Karl fully wrapped up by Jyushi, the reticulated naga completely coiling around the man as they both fell to the floor.

A crunch echoed through the room before Karl screamed out in pain, his lungs quickly emptying out due to the large constrictor slowly killing him.

"Jyushi, stop! Don't do it!" I jumped up and pushed at the closest section of Jyushi's tail, hoping to distract him enough. I had saved one naga from death so far, and I didn't want to do it again so soon, "Stop!"

"(Y/n), he was hurting you!" The naga partially turned to face me, a confused look on his face, "I'm not gonna let him keep doing it."

"I don't think he's going to do it anymore," Another voice joined in, "Sounds like you broke some ribs. Humans are much more fragile than I thought..."

I turned towards the new speaker as I felt Jyushi's coils relax under my hands, letting Karl land on the ground with a moan and a whimper. The red-headed naga slithered up close to him, tugging Karl's head upwards to face him with a hand curled under the man's jaw. Jyushi gave Oso some room, loosely coiling around me and slowly pulling me away from the downed Karl. I could only watch the interaction as Jyushi wrapped his arms around my shoulders.

"You still awake?" Oso leaned down towards Karl, the man moaning in pain as his eyes were torn between fear and pain.

Karl slowly nodded.

"Oh, good," Oso released the man's jaw, "You see, we're not as simple-minded as you think we are. If someone hurts something we like, then we get sad. If someone hurts some

one

we respect, we get mad. And Jyushi

really

likes (y/n)..."

I felt Jyushi's arms tense up at the mention of his name.

"You're the one that made her upset a few days ago, aren't you?" The reticulated naga's voice rumbled against my back. Karl looked over in fear at Jyushi, not paying me any mind.

"Seems so," Oso glanced back towards Jyushi and I before giving Karl his full attention again, "Now listen...I'm a nice naga, so I'll give you an offer. You can have your life as long as you leave hers alone. I'll even convince my brothers to keep playing this little prisoner game of yours, and we won't try to escape...as long as (y/n) remains as our 'keeper'."

"F-fine..." Karl stuttered, wrapping an arm around his chest as he backed away from Oso, "F-fine...!"

"Then it's a deal," Oso straightened out and moved away from Karl, sweeping an arm towards the elevator doors and freight entrance doors, letting the man pick his exit.

Karl slowly stood up with help from the wall near him and staggered over towards the elevator, using his keycard to call the elevator down. Jyushi, Oso, and I didn't move until the doors closed behind him.

"(Y/n), I was so worried when I heard the yelling...!" Jyushi rubbed his head against mine, slightly tightening his coils around my legs and waist while his arms lowered to my chest, pulling me close against him.

"What are you guys doing out here...?" I rubbed a hand against one of Jyushi's arms while looking over at Oso, "I thought I couldn't get to the door in time."

"When I heard the shouting start, I just simply pushed against the door you kept using," Oso's neutral look fell away with a smirk as he turned from the elevator to me, "I didn't think he'd survive one of my bites, so I got the next best thing."

I looked over as much as I could to see Oso's and Jyushi's enclosure doors wide open, "Do you think he'll actually honor his part of the deal?"

"Who, the human? That's up to him."

"And if he doesn't, then you can always ask us for help," Jyushi laughed.

"Just...promise me something, okay?" I looked at both nagas. They returned the look and waited, "Don't kill anyone."

"Only if they don't hurt you," Jyushi responded immediately with a smile while Oso rubbed the back of his neck.

"Oso...?"

"Fine, I won't kill anyone."

"All right...now I need you two to go back into your rooms. If someone finds you wandering freely down here, I could get into trouble," I looked up at Jyushi, "Jyushi, you can take that other food bucket on the table. Choro wasn't in the mood to eat today."

"Okay!" Jyushi released me and grabbed the bucket before moving towards his enclosure, "(Y/n), don't be shy about asking for help, okay?"

"I won't be, and I'll come back for your amazing hugs in a few hours," I escorted him to the enclosure door, closing it behind him when he was completely inside. Taking in a deep breath and turning to face Oso, the smile dropped from my face.

"So, now you know my predicament here."

"Known for a while," Oso dropped his own smirk, slithering over towards his enclosure, "The humans outside talk about you, saying that you're the naga whisperer. I find the bullshit they spew hilarious, but the reality of the situation isn't as funny."

I opened my mouth to explain, but he raised a hand towards me.

"Don't. I'm sure this 'Calmine' guy is holding us over your head, just like he's holding you over ours. Leverage, like you said," He opened his door wider, "Take your time."

Without a glance backwards, Oso glided into his enclosure and closed the door behind him.

I lowered my head as I slowly walked over and locked Oso's door, leaning against it and sliding down to the ground.

To my surprise, the week went by without incident.

I was able to speak with the other nagas as if nothing had happened, but still found it awkward to look Oso in the eye. He seemed to understand that I needed time before I was able to talk with him like I had before, only held back by my own mind.

If I wanted to get the nagas out of here, then I needed someone on the outside who could move about more freely than I was able to. The problem with that was I had no one to trust. My phone wasn't among my possessions, and there wasn't any kind of computer that I had access to.

I explored as far as I was allowed to go, pushing through the large double doors that I was escorted through and wandering the area up until the security booth. There was a keycard pad on the doors next to the booth, cutting off my range as the security officer watched me through the booth glass. With no way to interact with the officer, I turned back around and moved to the room that held my bed.

Sketching the layout I had access to in the field journal, my lips curled into a frown as every plan that I could think of completely relied on me getting some kind of internet connection.

Taking my time on cleaning out each of the naga's enclosures, I spotted each security camera and mapped them out in the journal sketch. As far as I knew, the only place that didn't have cameras was the back area that I was living in.

Choro had fully shed out and kept his distance from me until I was able to convince him that I wasn't holding what he did against him, his apologies

slowly vanishing from our conversations. I had found out that he was able to move some of the bottom rocks from the water feature, helping him out with the rest without worry of how soaked I'd get. I wanted him to feel comfortable, my own comfort be damned.

Todo had also shed out completely, returning to his prissy attitude as I gathered up his shed and dumped it into the garbage. Nothing I ever did seemed to be good enough for him, despite following his exact directions for cleaning out his enclosure. I tolerated Todo's verbal barbs a lot better than Karl's.

"Your arm..." Ichi called out in the silence as I cleaned out his enclosure, "...is it okay?"

I stopped raking the substrate and looked over to where he was lounging on a 'fallen tree', completely shocked that he spoke to me.

"Yeah, it's doing better," I quickly recovered, giving him a reassuring smile before turning back to my task. He hummed a little in response, silence falling once more in the enclosure before I heard him take a breath.

"I...heard what happened."

Of course he did...I think all of them did.

"I see," I looked over my shoulder towards him, not pausing in my chore, "You don't need to worry about what happened."

"I'm...glad you were able to rely on Jyushi," I caught a rare smile from Ichi, seeing it for a brief second before his regular disinterested expression replaced the rarity.

"I am, too," Scooping up the pile of substrate into the garbage can, I gave Ichi a relieved look, "I hope that I'll be able to rely on you, too, sometime."

He turned his head to the side with a huff, readjusting himself to lounge on his coils facing away from me.

"Don't make too much of a mess, all right?" I tried to laugh as I hauled the garbage and rake towards the open door of Ichi's enclosure, closing it behind me. As I tossed the bag into a larger garbage bin and wheeled it to the large doors by the security office, I heard the elevator ding down the hall, drawing my attention back to the back area of the enclosures.

"Delivery for...hello?" I heard a voice call out as I headed back towards the area.

"Yeah, I'm right here," Responding as I got closer to the elevator, I saw one of the zoo employees holding a box roughly the size of a medium computer tower.

"Ah, this is the last delivery for today. Mr. Calmine couldn't be reached for signing, so we just sent it straight down to you," The employee smiled as she handed it over, "By the way, I heard what had happened earlier this week in regards to the teen. I am so relieved that you're okay."

"Oh," I glanced down to the package in confusion before recovering, "Yeah, I'm fine. I had warned them that stuff like that may happen, but I guess

I

was the one not ready for it."

"Are they...you know...real?"

I recognized the spark in her eyes. It was similar to when I first started learning about the nagas.

"The nagas? Yeah, they're all real. I don't know what the placards in front of their enclosures say, but I can guarantee that they're genuine," I gave a wide smile, moving over to the prep table and setting down the package, "The zoo's not getting flak over people claiming them to be hoaxes, is it?"

"Not as much as I thought we'd get," The employee walked in a little further, looking around the back area, "Oh, I'm so rude...My name is Sasha. I work with the exotics upstairs, specifically the venomous section."

"A fellow herpetologist, then. Nice to meet you, Sasha. My name is (y/n), and I'm the naga keeper," I reached out a hand for her to shake, Sasha taking it enthusiastically.

Sasha was a shorter woman, only a few inches shorter than me. Her dyed blonde hair held some semblance of pale pink color, as if she was letting it fade over time, and her brown eyes were full of curiosity.

"Would...it be okay if I came by on my days off? I promise I won't get in the way. I just really want to see them up close."

"Only if my boss allows it and, if he says 'yes', only if

they

are okay with you," I pointed a thumb towards the enclosures, "They're just as smart as we are, with the same thought processes. It would be rude to invite a guest without the host knowing."

"Oh, of course!" She chided a little, her tone letting me know that she didn't take what I said completely seriously. I refrained from frowning, knowing that this would probably be the only time I'd see her.

"I shouldn't keep you too long. I can walk you to the security station, and they'll let you out," I motioned towards the large freight doors. Sasha turned towards the elevator, noticing the keypad.

"Ah, right. It was nice to meet you, (y/n), and I'll see if I'm able to come hang out."

The officer buzzed her through after she showed her ID card, and Sasha gave me a final wave before the door closed behind her. Walking as calmly as I could down the hallway, I sprinted to the package when I was out of sight from the security booth.

Cutting open the tape sealing up the box, I opened the flaps to see a single folded sheet of paper sitting on top of shredded crinkle paper. Hesitantly, I took the folded paper and opened it up.

'Hope this gives you the lift you need.'

It was signed by Jeff...the helicopter pilot.

Chapter 14

I shifted through the crinkle paper, my hand hitting something metallic before I searched for the edge of the object, pulling out a laptop from the box. I couldn't help but stare at the technology, opening up the laptop and turning it on.

It booted up immediately, loading the main screen without going to an account login. Digging back through the box, I found the charging cord for the laptop and moved into my bedroom, sitting on the bed while I messed around with it. There was an open wifi connection available and, with a few button clicks, I was connected to the internet.

The plans from before came back in force as I launched the web browser, immediately finding the San Diego Zoo's website and noticing a headline that advertised a new exhibit. The link brought me to a basic looking webpage with a single picture acting as a banner on the screen, the creature in the picture catching my eye. It was a picture that someone had taken when the nagas had just been put into the enclosures, and the coloration of the lounging naga was the same as Todo's scales.

Underneath the banner was a short blurb about what a naga was, and how they had been recently discovered. The small paragraph didn't mention anything about where the nagas came from, or who had discovered them.

Opening a new tab, I typed the keywords 'naga san diego zoo' into the search bar and pages of newspaper articles flooded the screen. Some articles were calling it a complex hoax while others simply reported the story, with some tabloids sneaking into the results with their claims of 'a new breed of humanity being found'. Each article I clicked on had the same picture of the exhibit announcement with three men standing proudly in front of the new enclosures. I recognized Calmine in the middle, no doubt being labelled as the 'discoverer' and being given all the credit.

There were a few blog pages dispersed with the news articles, most of them from local people that had been to the exhibit since its opening. They praised the costumes and special effects makeup, saying that the presentation was realistic enough to almost make them believe that nagas actually existed. Some other blogs claimed that it was fake news to bring more attention to the 'failing zoo' and to try to get money from their donors.

A reddit page was near the bottom of the first page of the search results, piquing my interest a little as I clicked onto the site. There was some user going by the name of '_nagawhisperer_' that was creating an AMA page, claiming that they were one of the caretakers of the nagas at the San Diego Zoo, that they had pictures of behind-the-scenes stuff with the nagas. I lowered my eyes into a hooded glare, partially tempted to create an account to make them shut up, but I'd probably get in trouble for it if I was found out. As widespread as the internet was, people would find out the truth about this 'naga whisperer' account and either buy their story or think it was fake. I clicked through some of the pictures that they had as 'evidence' for working with the nagas, and nearly laughed out loud when one of the pictures was of me feeding Kara. The only difference was they had photoshopped themselves where I was standing. Most of the people on the page called them out, saying that they were there at the actual feeding and they never saw that person.

I clicked off the reddit page, partially amused that someone thought they could get away with it. Taking in a breath to calm down from the laughter, I delved into the local newspaper articles to find out what Calmine was doing with the public about the nagas.

The same picture of him with two other men kept popping up, along with him showing off the front of the exhibits. I studied the pictures carefully, looking at the plaques that were set up to educate people. Most of them devolved to telling about the snakes that the nagas looked like, stating that nearly nothing is known about the nagas themselves.

"You'd know if you just asked them..." I muttered to myself before finding a picture of me talking to Jyushi during one of my visits in his enclosure. The blog that had the picture attached belonged to PETA. I closed my eyes and

groaned before opening the blog, knowing that they went to extreme lengths to paint whatever humanity did to animals in a negative light.

'These are wild animals and cannot be tamed! This woman is evil for trying to charm these beautiful creatures into submission!' The author of the blog spouted absolute nonsense, repeating the same point over and over that the nagas needed to be freed from the cruelty of the zoo, and I needed to be punished for even entering their cages with a superior attitude. They continued with the talk of needing to feed the nagas anything but meat because the human teeth they had were not meant to chew on raw meat...despite having a picture of Jyushi's mouth wide open when he was about to eat the meat from the public feeding, fully revealing the three rows of teeth in his mouth, one on his bottom jaw with the other two on the top jaw.

The sharpened teeth that were designed and meant for holding onto meat.

I rolled my eyes while closing the PETA blog tab, laying back on my bed while giving myself some time to cool down from the self-righteous crap that I'd seen. I couldn't start my own blog, as that'd probably get why too much attention too quickly, and since Calmine was more than likely acting as my 'representative', I would probably get into a lot of trouble that would trickle down to the nagas...

No, if I wanted to help them out of here, then I would need to be cautious. Announcing my plans to the internet would be the opposite of that.

Completely closing out the internet, I closed the laptop and let it charge on my bed before heading back to the main area. Grabbing the broom next to the dish drying rack, I started to sweep up the back area as I let my mind wander. For some reason, I now had access to the internet thanks to the helicopter pilot that had taken Erika and I to the island...but why was the package delivered here?

I stopped sweeping the floor and moved back towards the prep table, putting the box back together to look for a shipping label. The only label that I could find on the box had already been blacked out by a sharpie. Turning the box every which way, I couldn't find any other clue as to how

Sasha knew to deliver it to me before setting it down near the paper that was folded up inside of it. I picked up the paper again and looked it over just as carefully, not finding any kind of clue either.

"Weird..." I hummed as I put the box and paper away in the tiny room I called my bedroom, moving back to sweep the rest of the area before I heard a knocking coming from one of the enclosures. I quickly pinpointed which enclosure it was when there was a second knock, setting the broom aside and moving towards Kara's enclosure, opening the door when I unlocked it.

"Kara, what can I-"

"(Y/n), it's been so long since we've seen each other," Kara lay by the door, his normally bright teal-blue scales starting to show signs of dulling, "Am I able to come and keep you company?"

"Sorry, Kara, but no. They want you to stay in your room," I tried to not laugh while shaking my head.

"But there is nothing happening behind the black window, so that means there's no one there."

"It still means no, Kara. If you give me a few more moments to finish up what I was doing, then I can come in," I moved back to grab the broom, looking behind me to see Kara sitting back on a few of his coils while watching my every move, "We can still talk while I finish."

"What's a 'kiss'?"

I almost choked on air before I quickly regained my composure, tapping my fingers against the broom shaft before looking to the floor to calm my thoughts.

"Where did you hear that?"

"From the other side of the black window. I heard people talking about humans doing things 'only for a kiss', but I couldn't see what they were

talking about," Kara sounded disappointed.

"It's not that glamorous, really. A kiss is a gesture that humans give to other creatures to either show affection or respect," Kneeling down to collect the swept up pile into a dustbin, I thought about the wording as he would probably ask for a demonstration.

"So...is it like the hugs you give us?"

"A hug is a more friendly action while a kiss is meant to represent something more intimate," After dumping out the dustbin, I set the broom and bin aside before washing my hands, "At least...that's how I consider it."

"Is there something more intimate than a kiss?" Kara ran a hand over the scales on his right arm.

"There is, but you wanted to know what a kiss was," I steered the conversation back to the original topic, "A kiss is when you pucker your lips and place them on someone's person, like this."

I kissed the back of my hand, not doing anything more than the motion with the small 'pop' sound when the suction between my lips and skin was released.

"Like this?" Kara imitated the action, his lips pulling forward awkwardly before placing them on the back of his hand.

"Yeah, just like that. There are different places to kiss to show admiration or respect," I gave him an affirming smile, "For respect, you can kiss the other person's hand or cheek. For admiration, you can kiss either of those places or their own lips, forehead, or anywhere that's okay for the other person."

I pointed to each place that I told him about, pausing when his hand reached out and grabbed mine to pull me closer to him.

"I think I get the idea," Kara's voice was soft as he held me against him, leaning down towards my face. I sucked in a breath when I realized what

was happening, feeling my heart hammering against my chest as his lips drew closer...

...gently resting on my forehead for a few seconds before pulling away, a grand smile on his face as he released me.

"Did I do it right?" The look in his eyes was excited, like he had just accomplished a great goal in life.

"Y-yeah, you did," I gave him a wide smile, taking in deep silent breaths to calm down from the misunderstanding on my part, "That's a good place to kiss."

"I was worried that I was going to hurt you. Your heart was beating quickly, just like any prey that I hunt down," Kara settled lower on his coils, our eyes meeting on the same level.

"No, a kiss won't hurt me. I just wasn't expecting you to come towards my face, so it set me on edge a bit," I was honest for the most part. It seemed like he

was

going to kiss me on the lips, but changed his mind part way there.

"I didn't want to kiss you on the lips because I didn't want you to think that I was going to eat you, so I thought the forehead would be a better place," He hummed to himself in thought, "Though...that may not be good, either...since we ate our prey on the island head-first..."

"Well, all of you are big enough to eat me, but I'd like to think that you're not going to do it," I laughed a little nervously, "I'm sure I've given you plenty of chances when I'm cleaning your rooms, and since you haven't attempted it, I think I'm safe from being eaten alive."

Walking a little past him into the 'jungle', I looked towards the substrate and made sure that it was still at an acceptable level. I heard him move behind me as I conducted my maintenance walk through his enclosure.

"You're always looking around whenever you come in here," Kara moved up to one of the nearby trees, watching my movements as I rearranged some of the lighter branches that fell down, "Am I doing something wrong that you have to fix?"

"No, Kara, not at all. I just want to make sure that you're happy with what you're in because, unlike the island, you're not really able to move away from a bad spot that you don't like," I gave a sigh of satisfaction after finding a secure spot for the branches, "It's part of my job, so I want to make sure that you're as comfortable as I can make you."

"(Y/n), if I may be so bold as to ask...what would you have done if any of us had found you before Jyushi did?"

I paused in my investigation, curling a finger around my chin as I delved into thought, looking back at the specific memory.

"I suppose it would depend on what you or your brothers would've done in Jyushi's place. If they had reacted as he did, then there wouldn't be much of a change. If any of you acted out of hostility, then I probably would've left you well enough alone until I had more information on you," I rested both hands on my hips, looking back up to him with a smile, "Though, I probably wouldn't survive the first strike."

"Is that why you recoiled away when I was in that smaller room?"

"The container? Yeah," My smile slowly faded, "I didn't know what kind of naga you were, so I needed to be overly cautious and careful."

"So what changed between then and now?" Kara lowered himself from the branch, carefully sliding down to the ground.

I narrowed my eyes at his words, reminded of the mind games that Todo had tried to play with me, "If you're insinuating something, then just say it straight so I can understand in clear words."

"Then I'll make it clear as something you'd understand."

Kara loomed closer, his hands reaching out past my shoulders as I found myself almost pinned between him and a tree, the tip of his tail gripping my right calf tightly as he leaned further down to hover his lips near my ear.

"I think you know what I'm talking about, (y/n)..."

My heart beat a little faster as Kara pulled away, his copper eyes locked on mine as a satisfied smile rested on his lips.

Chapter 15

"Ugh, you stink."

I rolled my eyes in frustration before turning towards the pink-spotted naga, lowering my eyelids at the exaggerated gesture he was making: pinching his nose with his left hand and waving his right hand in front of his face as if the offending smell was overpowering. I shook my head as I started to rake through the deep substrate.

"Why do you smell so strongly of Kara? It's disgusting..." Todo coughed to accentuate his words.

"I was just in his room, so I wouldn't be surprised if I stank to high heaven for your senses," Leaning down to remove the larger chunks of wood from the waste pile, I began to lift handfuls into the trash bin next to me, "With all of this, I'm going to smell like you for the others, too. I can't exactly win the 'scent battle' between you guys."

"You could've taken a bath before you came in, at least," He moved from his resting place along the lower limbs of the tree behind me, the scales rubbing against the fake bark as the naga moved to the tree in front of me, "A change of clothes would've suited you, too."

"Are you just going to harass me because I've got an offending smell to you?" I paused in my chore, raising an eyebrow towards Todo.

"Depends...are you going to keep coming in here smelling awful?" Todo rested his chin on his hands, laying completely flat along the branch as a smug look rested on his face.

"Depends. Will you keep bitching about what I do in your room?" I sent him the same smug look he was giving me, seeing him flinch back a little before looking away.

"You suck at your job."

"Yup, absolutely."

"You should get fired."

"Wouldn't that be amazing."

He stared down at me, his eyes narrowed into slits as he regarded me with some kind of emotion as I looked back up at him. His forked tongue flicked out between his lips, lifting up and down in a lazy wave before slipping back in, and I returned the gesture before finishing up the grueling chore.

"Why is it always

you

?"

I hummed a question as I turned back towards him, seeing that Todo had shifted from laying flat to propping his upper body up with his elbows.

"You're the only one we ever see, ever since we were put in these...rooms. Why is that?"

"Because you're too much of a pain to deal with," I lugged the half full can out into the back area, grunting a little.

"Oh, ha ha," He chided, "I was being serious, human."

"I don't know the reason myself. I was just told to make sure that you're happy and healthy," Standing in the doorway, I looked up towards him, "If you needed a deeper reason than that, then you're out of luck because I don't know."

"Well, if you find someone to take your job, make sure they're easier on the eyes than you," His lips curled into a smile, "And more hygienic, too."

"Of course, your majesty."

I slammed the door closed, turning the lock with a hefty finality before moving towards my room, taking off my shirt as I went.

After the brief shower, I slipped into fresh clothes before rubbing the back of my neck, stretching out and sighing. With the zoo closed, I only had a few more chores to do before I could even think of going to bed, and even then I wanted to explore some more of my escape plans online. Counting out what I had already done on my left fingers, I moved my gaze towards the cage that I hadn't entered in almost a week.

With the enclosures of Choro, Ichi, Kara, and Todo cleaned up, the only things left were for me to take care of Jyushi and Oso...

I let out a slow sigh.

I still hadn't figured out how to talk with Oso like normal. It still weirded me out that he was so relaxed in the situation after knowing that I was just as much of a prisoner as he and his brothers were. I paused outside Oso's door, taking in a breath and pressing down on the lever, the humidity of the enclosure washing over me like a gross wave as I stepped inside while leaving the door open behind me.

The enclosure was almost silent save for the running water feature, the warmed spring washing across the smaller rocks that made it sound like a real river that could be found somewhere in the world. Seeing that the widened part of the 'river' was empty, I looked up around me to try and find the naga.

"Oso?"

"Sup?" His voice asked from deeper within the 'jungle', sounding like a yawn.

"I'm going to clean out your room, okay?"

"That's fine."

Heading back to the door, I grabbed the rake I'd been using previously and an empty trash bag, making sure the bag was opened all the way before heading back into the enclosure. Starting at the farthest part of the enclosure, I started to rake up the top layer of substrate while lightly humming a song in my head. Halfway through the enclosure, I spotted Oso laying underneath one of the heated lamps set up near the back of the enclosure, out of sight from the black window.

The red-haired naga looked like he was sleeping, or close to it, as he partially opened his eyes when I came close before closing them again.

"I'm going to need to get underneath you, Oso," I gently raked around the outer coil of his tail, lightly tapping his scales for emphasis.

"Mmm, just let me have the hot heat for a few moments longer..." His torso turned over, as if he was shifting spots in bed, "It'll turn off soon..."

"You're going into a blue shift," I realized that his black scales were gaining a bluish color, "Anything I should know about you before you shed?"

"Mm-nah..." His mouth widened into a yawn, the ends of his lips almost splitting down to his ears, the two long fangs hidden in the flesh sheaths as they flexed outward before tucking back in. Oso partially opened one of his eyes again as his mouth shrank once more to appear more human, "Are you worried about me being hypersensitive?"

"I'd rather not be attacked by accident again," I began to rake out the substrate that was underneath him as Oso began to move, the light clicking to a less intense level. I groaned as the lighting in the entire enclosure dimmed to a near darkness, "Damn...I was hoping to be finished before this..."

"Have you seen my brothers today?"

I nearly jumped out of my skin as Oso's voice was much closer than I anticipated, swallowing a yell, "...I did. I just took a shower because Todo was being obnoxious about how I smelled, and I didn't want to deal with it from you or Jyushi."

"Oh?" His voice shifted from my right shoulder to my left. I could feel the freshly absorbed heat radiating off of his chest, "Whose scent was he being obnoxious about?"

"Kara's musk was super strong on me, apparently," I stumbled my way towards the back wall, dropping the rake to free both of my hands as I used the wall to guide myself to the door. I sucked in a breath when I felt two arms wrap around my waist, lifting me off the ground and moving me somewhere, "Hey, what are you--?!"

"You're clearly blind in the dark," Oso's voice sounded near my ear, his breath brushing against my neck, "Unless it was your goal to stumble around until you fell into the water. I can always put you back."

"No...Just by the door, thanks," My voice grew soft as I felt him take a breath behind me, moving around the trees until my feet touched solid ground again.

"So, what were you and Kara doing for his scent to upset Todo?" Oso asked as I fumbled with the lever on the door, pulling it up and pushing it out slightly, blindly feeling for the light switch right next to the doorway.

"We were talking about different things," Muttering a small 'ah', I flipped the light on and turned to see an amused Oso positioned near the door with his arms crossed over his chest.

"Just talking, huh?"

"Well...not

just

talking. He had asked what a kiss was, and I showed him. He gave one to me," I pointed a finger to my forehead, "Kara did it twice, but I guess the contact was enough to get his smell on me."

"Are you going to show me what a kiss is?" The red-haired naga drew closer, almost pinning me between him and the door, if it wasn't open. His

eyes narrowed slightly, "With your face like that, I'm almost tempted to

make

you show me."

I raised both hands to feel a heat spread through my cheeks, closing my eyes in frustration before looking up at the smirking naga. His facial expression changed when we made eye contact, shifting from the mischievous look to one that appeared relieved.

"You haven't freaked out yet."

"What?" I moved my hands away from my cheeks, raising an eyebrow in confusion.

"You're talking to me again without that scared look in your eyes," Oso moved away from me, giving me space to move back towards where I had dropped the rake.

"Yeah...I guess you're right," Glancing back towards him as I walked along the wall, I saw him following close behind me, "Something I can help you with?"

"You can still show me what a kiss is."

"(Y/n)!"

Blindsided by Jyushi when I opened the door, I was forced to drop the bag and rake as Jyushi pinned my arms underneath his, lifting me up a little from the small tackle before rolling back onto the ground and curling some of his tail around my lower half. His arms slipped underneath my shirt again, pressing me closer to his chest.

"Jyushi...!"

It was hard to catch my breath after the greeting, feeling him constrict around me before loosening up as we lay on the ground. I stilled when I felt his head lower against mine, rubbing his cheek from my jawline down to the crook of my neck, his tongue flicking against my skin before taking in a breath. The PETA blog surfaced in my mind, bringing a smile to my face at the imaginary article that would be written if they saw this scene.

"Am I hurting you?" The softness in Jyushi's voice took me by surprise, catching my attention as I looked into his orange slitted eyes.

"No, not at all...Do you feel like you're hurting me?"

"Mm-mmm," He shook his head slightly, "I just wanted to make sure because of what I did to that other human. It didn't feel like I was squeezing him hard when I felt his bones crack, and I didn't want to put you in that kind of pain."

"Oh, Jyushi," I was able to pull my right arm free, laying my hand on his head and stroking the white-and-yellow hair, "You don't need to worry about that. If you're hurting me in any way, I'll let you know."

"Okay," Jyushi opened his mouth into a wide smile, revealing some of his teeth, "The same goes for you, too. I'll let you know if you're ever hurting me in any way."

"I doubt that I can hurt you physically," I rubbed his head a little harder, seeing his eyes close in satisfaction as the smile partially melted off of his face, "But I appreciate it."

We lay there in silence as he took my heat while I rubbed him on the head, a tangle of limbs as we enjoyed each other's company. A soft rumble began in his chest before it rose to his throat, a sign that I had deciphered as him in deep thought. Before long, he'd ask a question to start up a conversation where he wanted to learn something.

I prayed that it wasn't about kissing.

"Hey, (y/n)...when do you think I can see all of my brothers?" Jyushi's hands shifted on my back, laying on other spots that were still warm to him.

"...that's a tough question, Jyushi..." My hand fell away from his head, drawing his attention towards me, "I'm not sure. I want you all to see each other again and not use me as a line of communication to make sure that the others are all right, but I'm not sure when that's going to be."

The reticulated naga fell silent for a little while, his coils slowly shifting around me as he took in deep breaths, my legs feeling his long lungs filling up with the air before pushing it out. I lowered my free hand to lightly run down the side of his scales, starting near his waist and going as far as I was able to reach before pulling my hand up and repeating the motion.

I don't know how long we lay there.

"Hey, (y/n)?"

"Mm-hmm?"

"What's a 'kiss'?"

Chapter 16

I groaned loudly into my pillow.

Ever since I had told Kara about what a kiss was, the brothers had all seemed adamant about knowing more in regards to the action. I had managed to get away from Jyushi by promising to show him later, quickly going through his enclosure and cleaning it before bidding him a good night.

I couldn't figure out how they knew about it.

Kara had mentioned that he heard someone talking about it from beyond the black window, but the odds were really low for that to happen to Oso and Jyushi as well. I remembered that Kara also mentioned hearing me through the wall when I first went into their enclosures, so it was possible that the nagas could've heard me talking about it...

I lay on my side, taking in slow breaths as I looked at the laptop charging on top of my duffle bag. Raising myself on all fours, I reached out to unplug the laptop before bringing it over and resting it on my stomach. Lounging back, I turned on the laptop and opened the internet browser to start working on an escape plan.

Most of the easy getaways would take a lot of money, which I didn't have since access to my personal banking account was cut off and I wasn't being paid for taking care of the nagas. I'd have to find an amateur way to get the six large nagas out of one of the more renowned zoos in America, and I only had five more months before the nagas were moved to somewhere in the Midwest...with no guarantee that I'd be going with them.

My fingers froze on the keyboard, the thought chilling me to the core. I had always assumed that I was going to be the only one taking care of them, but what if Calmine decided that I wasn't needed anymore? Would I be

discarded and dumped back into the public with no way to trace where the nagas went?

I blinked away the tears as I kept searching for some kind of service I could take advantage of, or for some transportation that wouldn't cost an arm and a leg to carry the nagas.

An airplane would be the best bet, but the island didn't have a place long enough to act as a runway. A helicopter would be the next option, but I didn't have a license to fly nor did I have enough money to rent a helicopter large enough to transport six nagas that probably weighed closer to an elephant or two. A cargo ship would take too long, and I didn't want to put the nagas back into cargo containers when they were shipped over in them...

Jeff!

I scrambled to grab the folded letter, keeping the laptop on my stomach as I re-read the letter he had sent. There wasn't a company name attached to the letter, only Jeff's name.

I typed in a combination of his name, 'helicopter', and 'business', hoping that they would unlock the answer that I needed. Clicking on the images tab, I slowly scrolled through the pictures until I saw a face I recognized, hovering the mouse over the website to see it connected to an 'About Me' page. I opened the site to see a well-outlined webpage, Jeff's smiling face at the top left corner while the block of text described his history of aviation. There were multiple tabs on the website, listing a 'Hangar Gallery & Prices', 'Shop', 'About Me', 'Contact Us', and 'Services'.

As I dug through the website, I learned that Jeff was a contract pilot who owned his own business that ranged from touring flights to cargo drops, employing an array of pilots that were skilled in each job that the business engaged in. The hangar that he owned held a large collection of ready-to-fly helicopters, including one that looked just like the helicopter that took the nagas off the island. It was called a Mil Mi-26TS and could be reserved for a heavy lifting job for...a lot of money.

I clicked on the 'Contact Us' tab, seeing a questionnaire fill the page that asked general questions about what service I was interested in hiring his company for, how long would I need the service to last, and where they were able to contact me. Creating a new e-mail account quickly and using it as a point of contact, I sent in the questionnaire and stared at the screen while letting out a sigh I didn't realize I was holding.

Laying in the silent dark, I leaned my head back onto my pillow as I closed the laptop, gently sliding it underneath my duffle bag before rolling over in the mattress. I could only hope that Jeff would understand my situation and help me bring the nagas back.

"Ah've received a few complaints from the visitors tha' ya spend too much time wi'the monsters."

My hands were once again secured behind my back as I sat in the uncomfortable folding chair in front of Calmine's desk, having been woken up and dragged here early in the morning. My hair was a mess, my brain was still trying to wake up from the rude alarm clock of two men barging into the room, and my social filter wasn't activated yet.

"The visitors can kiss my ass...they're not the ones that have to deal with six needy nagas," I lowered my head, barely able to keep my voice to a whisper.

"Shut up," One of the men next to me shoved my head down roughly.

"Ya can' be tryin' tah humanize the creatures. Thawr tah be left wild'n untamed," The large man pulled out a cigar from the small pack, quickly cutting and lighting it in a trained movement, "The only interaction tha' yawr allowed tah have wit'em is tah feed 'em during the day, an' clean the cages afta the zoo's closed for the day."

"The nagas need entertainment. In the wild, they had prey to hunt, things to watch. Here, they can only stare at a wall and hope that something comes along to provide action in their dull day," I pushed my head up against the

man's hand, feeling his fingers intertwine with my hair as he got a better grip, "Even people in prison have forms of entertainment!"

"Thawr dumb an' ill-witted things, nah actual humans," A puff of smoke streamed from between Calmine's lips, "They've developed an int'resting skill tha mimics human anatomy, but that don't make 'em human."

"So you're just going to treat them like dumb beasts?"

"Ms. (Y/n), yawr beginnin' tah bore me wi'this banter. Ya ain't got no say in what happens tah'em," Calmine slammed a hand down against his desk, making me jolt in response, "Yawr just the person tha' found 'em. Nothin' more."

I remained silent as he looked me over, refraining from talking back to him.

"With one o' mah workers on bed leave for the next few weeks, ah'm assignin' someone else tah help you with 'em monsters. He'll be collectin' venom from the monsters tha're venomous," The large man gave a proud smile, "With the large amount 'o venom tha' those creatures could produce, we'll be able tah speed up some of the process with antivenom creation."

I glowered at Calmine. If I spoke up about how inhumane milking a naga for their venom could be, I'd look like the bad guy for not wanting to help humanity...which is something he probably wanted from me.

"Glad tah see that we agree on that. He'll be comin' with the next food delivery."

Watching the double doors close and lock behind me, I rubbed my wrists as I walked down the hallway, stifling a yawn while opening the refrigerator door. Taking out a prepared fruit cup, I broke the seal by tearing off the top and poured the contents into my mouth, not even bothering with a spoon or a fork. Tossing the empty cup, I groaned as I rubbed my forehead with the back of my hand.

A new employee to replace Karl while his ribs healed.

Considering that Calmine hadn't chewed me out about Jyushi almost killing one of his employees, Karl had kept his end of the deal with Oso. I could only guess that this new person was somewhat skilled in toxinology, or knew how to milk venom from a snake.

I needed to warn the nagas that someone was going to be messing with their mouths, and possibly find out a way to make both parties happy with the intrusive action. Since the food was coming in the next few days, I had a small window to tell the oldest three nagas...and decided to go against what my gut was yelling at me to not do.

I unlocked Oso's, Kara's, and Choro's doors, swinging them wide open before walking back towards the prep table where they'd be able to see me without completely leaving their enclosures.

"...(Y/n)?" Choro cautiously looked out the doorway before seeing me leaning against the metal table, "Don't you usually come in?"

"I wanted to talk to you three," I looked towards Oso's and Kara's open enclosures, seeing both nagas staring out at me with partial confusion on their faces, "And I'd rather have one conversation instead of three."

"Won't you...be punished for us coming out?" Kara leaned down, running a hand along the bottom of the doorway before his fingers brushed against the cold concrete of the back room.

"Don't completely leave your rooms and you'll be fine. I don't want you guys to lose heat too quickly since it's cold back here."

"(Y/n)..." The word from Oso's lips didn't ask a question, but I returned the unspoken warning with a confident look. His eyes narrowed slightly before leaving his enclosure, resting a small length of scales on the concrete before stopping and looking over towards Kara and Choro to see them do the same. I watched the three carefully, seeing them wordlessly interact with each other from their doorways, fascinated at the slight shifts in facial

reactions to something that went unsaid. When they seemed satisfied with whatever they were doing, the three venomous nagas looked back at me.

"It seems like Karl will be taking an extended leave of absence to heal up from an injury," I resisted looking towards Oso, instead pressing both of my hands together and focusing on them as my nails grew white from the tension, "This means that my boss will be transferring someone else to be in contact with me and, by extension, you. Specifically, you three. I don't know his name, but I was warned that he wanted to..."

I tapped my index fingers against my chin, trying to find a better term than 'milking'.

"...collect venom from you guys."

"Collect venom?" Kara shook his head in disgust as he recoiled, his coils tightening into an 's' shape.

"What does that mean?" Choro hunkered down a little, the exhale turning into a light hiss.

Oso's only response was the fierce glare sent my way.

"Well, it's a simple process that humans perform on regular venomous snakes. We extract venom from them by pressing on their glands and collecting what's extracted in a container of some sort," I made the small motion with my hands, with my left holding a 'tube' while my right thumb extended and pressed down on something above the 'tube', "We can't do it to the same snake very often because it stresses them out, and it takes a long time for the glands to reproduce whatever amount we took-"

"You're going to harvest us for our venom," Oso cut in, his hiss was prominent as his pupils shrank into furious slits as he glared at me.

"No!" I held up both hands in front of me as if they could offer some form of protection, "I...We won't do anything to harm you. The snake isn't actually harmed by the process."

"Then why take the venom?" Kara inched a little closer, his coils not relaxing as his pupils thinned.

"Humans collect the venom to create antivenom, a strong antitoxin that's completely effective against that type of snake's venom. My boss thinks that if we're able to get some venom from you guys, it would help speed up the process...since you're much larger than actual snakes," I lowered my hands, pressing them together again before looking towards the floor, "I would rather that you not go through the process...but I wanted to warn you so that when the time comes, you'll understand why we're doing this."

"Do you know how long it'll take for us to recover?" Choro raised up a little, his right hand rubbing along his neck nervously.

"I don't know..." I shifted my eyes towards him, "It normally depends on the type of snake and how much venom is taken out. It could take between weeks and months, depending on how active your venom gland is."

"We'd be defenseless," Oso crossed his arms over his chest, his eyes snapping towards Choro and Kara for a moment. Both of the other nagas returned the sharp look before all three of them looked towards me in unison. I took in a quick breath before any of them spoke.

"I can show you how it works. It won't be done the same way for you, but the steps that are followed should be about the same," I started to move towards my room, "I'll try to rig something that will work for your fangs if you agree."

Grabbing the laptop and quickly bringing up a snake milking video, I played it on full screen for them to watch as I came closer to them. I watched their reactions as the snake handler pulled the snake out of the cage and let it rest on the floor before reaching down right behind its head and grabbing it. The handler took the snake over to a collection vial and let the snake bite down on the film fastened over the vial, acting like the skin of a victim and pressing up against the venom glands.

The nagas had a different range of reactions, from shock and curiosity to uncertainty and distrust. I closed the laptop after the video finished, setting

it down on the prep table before looking back towards the nagas.

"That's how humans extract venom from a snake, but that's not what I'm going to let them do to you. I've got a few ideas about what to do, but I won't try any of them unless you agree to it. You guys are...the only nagas humanity has seen," My voice grew softer against my wishes, "I'm not going to let them hurt or damage you."

"I'll do it. If it can help against the venom of the snake I appear as, then I'll offer what I can," Kara brushed away some of his bangs with a hand, flashing a confident smile towards me. His body language had completely relaxed throughout the video, listening raptly to the man's voice-over of what he was doing and why he was doing it.

"I'll...try," Choro nodded slightly, "As long as you're there with me, I'll be able to do it."

"I'll be there, Choro," I gave him a comforting smile before looking towards the red-haired naga, "Oso...?"

"If my brothers want to do it, then I'll join, too. Same conditions as Choro, though," Oso's silent fury fell away with a wide smile, his body relaxing as he let his hands rest against his waist.

"Hey, no fair! Same condition for me, then!" Kara cried out, looking towards the other two with a hurt look on his face.

"I'll be there for all of you," I gave a wide smile, feeling a burden lift off my chest, "I promise. Now...I just have a small favor to ask..."

"Which is?"

"...can I measure your fangs?"

Chapter 17

I had managed to procure a few tools from the exotics department, using the e-mail as a way of communication and asking for permission to modify a spare set of tubing. Using the knives in the kitchen, I was able to craft the tubing into an appropriate channel for the naga venom. I couldn't test it out until the man started to do the job, unfortunately, but Kara helped ensure that the tubing fit their fangs since he had the thickest and longest pair.

I had received an e-mail from Jeff's business with a comment that they were notified of my issue and Jeff would personally respond to my request, as he had flagged it as high priority. My heart fluttered with anticipation when I read his response:

'(Y/n),

I want to help you since you seemed to be earnest about what you were going to do when you went to the island. To hear that the new discoveries were put on display with you tending to them was a shock, and caused quite a stir. I have a crew willing and ready to operate the Mil for you and your nagas but we're unable to touch down at the San Diego Zoo proper. There's simply not enough room for the rotor clearance.

However, if you're able to try and find a way to get the nagas to the northern edge or somewhere near Morley Field, we would be able to pick you up there. Contact me again after you've confirmed you have a way to get them out.

Jeff Campbell,

Owner of Heli-Hub'

I had a pass to get the nagas home and now I needed to find some way to get them there. Looking up Morley Field, I realized that it wasn't terribly far from where we currently were, and could make it there in less than twenty minutes. The only issue I could see were the two roads that lay between the

zoo and the park. The nighttime escape that I was originally thinking would be better...unless I was able to convince the zoo staff that the nagas needed an air evacuation for something important.

Shaking my head, I closed the laptop and lay on the mattress while staring at the ceiling. I had told Oso, Kara, and Choro about the new guy transferring this morning after I got back, but I didn't have the energy to tell the others. He would probably do some interacting with them, too, but I was certain that it would only be for the first day or so. There was no way that I'd let him know about the escape plan starting to form, considering he worked directly under Calmine.

The elevator chimed as I closed the fridge door after putting some of the leftover meat back in, having cut it up into much smaller chunks so I could throw them into the fresh delivery tomorrow or give them to the nagas if they wanted something small to tide them over until the next big meal. Both doors slid open before releasing its sole occupant, hard sole boots thudding against the floor as they stepped out onto the concrete floor.

"You must be (y/n)."

His deep voice startled me, not matching the youthful face that he had. Black hair fell in loose curls that settled around his ears, almost hiding the blue eyes regarding my own form as we took in details about each other. The dark olive skin made the tan shirt stand out a little more than usual as his hands tucked themselves into the pockets of the black pants hanging from his waist.

"The one and only," I washed my hands of the meat juice and red dye, turning to him after drying them on a paper towel, "Are you the one that Calmine sent to help?"

"Yeah," The gravelly voice slipped through his lips, barely moving his mouth as he spoke, "Name's Raoul. I also heard that you've been asking for milk tubing, or something like that."

"I was, and I have some for whenever you want to do...that," I nodded and moved towards a small cart resting between Jyushi's and Kara's enclosures, lifting up a short length of hollow tube that had one of the ends cut into a diagonal, "Since their fangs are longer than most snakes you've probably worked with, I wanted to make sure that the tubing we used fit."

"Did you already do it?" Raoul sounded closer.

"No, not yet," I looked behind me to see Raoul nearly breathing down my back, staring down at the tubing before I quickly moved out of the way, "I don't have any experience milking snakes for venom, so that's all you. I would like to be there throughout the process, though. The nagas have expressed that they'll go through with it if I'm with them."

His blue eyes swept over the cart, seeing the customized tubing and the various containers for chilling the venom laid out on the surface, picking them up individually and turning them over before setting them back down. Raoul glanced over to me before looking towards the enclosures.

"Have you cooled down the cages?"

Most venom milkers turned down the temperature range in the cages to ensure that the snake would be sluggish and not completely responsive to sudden movements.

"No," I partially narrowed my eyes, "I've spoken to each of them and made them aware of what you're about to do."

"And you think that they'll just blindly follow your orders?" The blue hues sharpened as they focused on me again.

"I don't give them orders. I asked if they wanted to give it willingly and they obliged," I stared back into Raoul's eyes, offering him a silent challenge, "Treat them like humans and you'll be fine. Forget that and you're in for a world of hurt."

"Please..." Raoul scoffed as he lay a hand on Kara's door lever, "Just because they look human doesn't mean they have the same level of

intelligence."

He pulled down the lever and swung the door wide open, revealing Kara waiting on the other side with his arms crossed over his chest. The teal-blue naga had settled right in front of the door and reared away slightly when he saw Raoul, a light hiss coming from his lips as the slitted copper eyes regarded the man in front of me.

Raoul took a slight step back in surprise while I came forward, dodging around him and acting as a barrier between Raoul and Kara.

"Afternoon, Kara," I moved my head to catch the naga's glare, seeing a complete change in attitude as his pupils slightly widened, "You caught us by surprise since you're usually in the back corner around this time."

"I smelled food, and then heard someone new," A confident smile crossed his lips, his arms relaxing and moving a hand to smooth down his hair, "I'm guessing this is the new guy?"

"Yes," I partially turned to let Kara see more of him, "His name is Raoul, and he's the one that's going to be using those tubes on you."

"Sorry for the scare earlier, Raoul," Kara gave a confident smile, "We don't get any visitors, so we're a little tense when we hear someone besides (y/n)."

"Ah..." Raoul's voice shook a little before growing steady once more, "I'm not going to be bothering you very long, so we can start whenever you're ready."

"What do you need me to do?" I noticed that Kara didn't relax fully from his stance, his eyes glancing over towards me before settling on Raoul's hands as the man held up the tubing I had modified, "Ah, those."

"Could you...extend your fangs?" Raoul seemed out of his element for a little while before lashing the tubing to one of the medium vials that were on the cart. Kara frowned a little before opening his mouth wide, the lips splitting down to his ears and revealing the large mouth. His fangs

descended from their folded position before Raoul lined the tubing up with the left fang, starting with the closest one, "(Y/n), would you be able to massage the gland?"

"Uh, sure..." I moved around Raoul and took up a position right next to him, watching his hand carefully move the fleshy sheath from the fang and sliding the tubing up until it was halfway on the fang, "I'm sorry if this feels weird, Kara."

I had found out that the naga venom glands ran behind their ears and partially down the sides of their necks, mainly figuring it out through questions as I measured the tubing against their fangs. Gently rubbing the backs of my fingers against Kara's neck, I felt the extra pouch move underneath my touch, compressing and expelling the venom stored within the gland. Something wrapped around my right leg but I was unable to look down to see what it was, my attention fully on what I was doing. I couldn't be distracted when the translucent cream-colored liquid flowing down the tubing could kill Raoul and I if it entered our bodies.

Raoul pulled the tubing off of the left fang when I had run my fingers over the venom gland multiple times, pressing slightly harder with each pass. Finally able to glance down, I recognized the rust-colored scales of Kara's tail firmly holding my leg in place.

"Kara, I need to move to your other side. Just bear with it for another moment longer, okay?" The teal-blue scales felt cool under my hand as I rested a hand on his shoulder, the skin warm. As our eyes met, I noticed that Kara looked out of it, "Kara...?"

"I'm good..." He partially closed his mouth to give me a smile before opening it wide again for Raoul to prepare his right fang. Kara's tail released my leg, and I moved to the other side to repeat the process. When Raoul pulled the vial away, Kara lowered himself down to the ground and adjusted his jaw while folding his fangs back into their passive position. I knelt next to him in worry, seeing the naga act like he had been drugged and was suddenly lethargic.

"Kara," I held his head between my hands, "Are you all right?"

"Just...felt weird. Good but...

weird

," Kara's eyes met my own, a clouded look over them as he gave a weak smile, "I'm just going to rest for a little bit."

"We'll leave you be. I'll check on you later on, okay?" I leaned in and gave a light kiss on his forehead before pulling away, leaving him to recuperate alone for a little while. Kara's tail slid down my leg as I walked past, almost like a last ditch effort for my attention as I turned to face him again. The blue insularis naga had curled into a pile of coils, sleepily raising his head to look at me before closing his eyes and laying back down.

A seed of uncertainty grew in my stomach, worry making it grow as I started to fear that milking the nagas may be detrimental to their health.

Slowly closing the door to Kara's enclosure, I pursed my lips in thought before turning to see Raoul preparing the second vial. Kara's venom had filled the entire vial with some venom overflowing into the tubing, a strong clip clamping off the end so none of it would escape. I could only stare at the quantity, the numbers flying in my head that the amount of venom Kara had given could kill up to a thousand people.

"...sorry."

"What?" I looked towards Raoul, seeing a shift in his expression.

"I'm sorry," He glanced back towards me as he wedged another tube into an empty vial, "The rumors going around had colored my opinion of you and your intent, saying that you had charmed the nagas into acting more human because of a twisted fetish you have."

F-Fetish?!

A deep blush rushed up my face,

What the hell were people talking about out there?!

"In fact, most of the keepers here don't like you," Raoul held the vial and tubing close to his face, ensuring that there was a tight seal between the two, "Something about the six fakes slumming it up with you when the zoo closes, since none of us ever see you come or go."

The blush vanished as I turned my attention to the floor, realizing that my escape plan wasn't going to be as easy as I thought if the rumor mill about me in the zoo was this vicious. I probably wasn't going to get any kind of help from the other keepers.

"Considering what I'd just seen and done, though..." Raoul set the vial and tubing down on the cart, wheeling it towards Choro's and Oso's enclosures, "...I'll see if I can convince the other keepers that these creatures are real. You should come out sometime and join us for the office party happening in a few weeks, too."

I looked up to him as I followed, surprise settling on my face as he turned back to me with a small smile resting on his lips.

Oso had reacted in the same way that Kara did when Raoul and I were finished extracting the venom, a glazed look covering his eyes with a small whine to his voice. He had crawled away towards the water feature in his enclosure, quietly promising that he was okay.

The amount of venom that Oso had given was slightly less than Kara's amount, only filling up the vial. Raoul had clamped off the tubing to collect any excess that remained, putting together the final tubing and vial as I opened Choro's door.

"Time for that already?" Choro lounged in one of the trees, his humanoid half leaning backwards to look down at me. His eyes partially narrowed in dissatisfaction as Raoul stepped into view before fully lowering himself to the ground, his tail wrapping around my right leg after settling into position.

"Choro, this is Raoul. He'll be doing most of the work," I held out my left hand towards Raoul before continuing, "Kara and Oso both already had this done and they've been fine...for the most part..."

"What do you mean?" Choro lowered his head beneath mine, catching my eye as I tried to look at the ground.

"They were both...

tired

...afterwards?" I held up my head again as the statement turned into a question, keeping eye contact with Choro as he returned to a relaxed position, "I didn't think it was too rough for them."

"Since your venom glands are located on the neck, (y/n) has to massage the venom out," Raoul picked up where I wasn't sure to go, "The process isn't painful, but it did make them lethargic."

Choro glanced between the two of us before giving a soft smile, "They'll be fine."

Raoul and I started the same process with Choro, my fingers massaging the sides of his neck while Raoul made sure to collect every drop that came out. I noticed that Choro's venom glands were a lot smaller than Kara's and Oso's, chalking it up to the fact that his venom was more potent than the others. When Raoul said that the one fang was finished, Choro reached up and rubbed the corner of his jaw, his breathing picking up a little as I started to move towards the other side.

The other side was finished with ease before I felt Choro shift his weight slightly and lean against me, his breathing now almost labored. His eyes were closed as a faint redness spread across his cheeks.

"Choro...?" I bit my inner cheek as he started showing the same signs that Oso and Kara had. He said that they'd be fine, but I had no idea what was going on with them. I rested the back of my hand on the naga's forehead, feeling the flustered skin between the sparse scales.

"I think they developed some kind of fever..." I turned towards Raoul, "Are you able to take care of the venom from here?"

"Yeah, go ahead and do your job," He nodded, clamping the tube shut and closing the door behind him as he left the enclosure.

With some effort, I untangle my legs from Choro's tail and pull him towards the deep section of his 'river', tucking both of my hands underneath his armpits and dragging him step by step. As we neared the back of the 'river', Choro suddenly shifted his weight forward in my hands and caused us to fall into the running water, my booted feet unable to steady myself underneath the additional weight.

Sucking in a shallow breath, my body hit the warm water as Choro slipped from my grasp. Quickly figuring out which way was up, I kicked off the bottom of the soaking pool and breached the surface before I felt two arms pull me back under. Without much time to take in a new breath, I shoved against the arms as I felt them grip me tighter, a hand reaching up to the back of my head with the other held my waist tightly against a muscular body. Fear raced up my spine as my legs couldn't move anymore, feeling thick coils wrap around them as smaller coils looped around my chest.

My vocal protests were smothered as a pair of lips pressed down against my own, the hand behind my head keeping me in position as I stared up in fear at the dark green eyes looking down at me with an unmistakable emotion:

Lust.

Chapter 18

Water swirled around my ears as Choro pressed his lips against mine, holding me tightly within his coils while a flurry of emotions surged through my head. His lips felt odd against mine, a hidden need driving his actions as the surface of the water remained tantalizingly close. Wrenching my head away from his, I fought against his body wrapped around mine before the last of my air escaped my lungs. A look of worry crossed his face as darkness swallowed my vision, my mind drifting off into a comfortable numbness.

My chest hurt, something pressing down repeatedly in a quick motion before something covered my mouth. I tried to take a breath in, only to feel my lungs spasm and cough out something that was blocking my airway, sucking down more air before another coughing fit. Something warm passed between my lips as I felt my body shift.

There was yelling...or maybe it was talking.

Another deep breath passed into my lungs easily, the oxygen rousing my mind as the voices grew louder in my ears. My eyes slowly opened to see leaves and dirt underneath me, the ground warm to my fingers as I looked up towards the trees. Was I back on the island?

No...I was still at the zoo and in one of the enclosures. I looked around me to see a dark haired man pointing a finger at me before jabbing it towards a green snake-human hybrid.

Naga

, my mind corrected itself. How long had I been out to forget what they were?

The green naga...

Choro

...looked towards the dark haired man defensively, part of his tail curled around a thick tree trunk like he was clinging to it for some kind of support. His dark green eyes darted over towards me, his voice dying in his throat as he stared at me with widening eyes. The man glanced over to see what Choro was reacting to, rushing over when I started to move into a sitting position.

"(Y/n), slow down," The man...

Raoul

...his voice was deep and sounded tense, his hands moving towards my shoulders to steady me, "You've been out for a while, so take it slow."

"Define 'a while'," I shifted my gaze towards Raoul, wiping my mouth off with the back of my hand and noticing that my hair and clothes were soaking wet.

"About two minutes. I performed CPR but didn't call for medical assistance considering...who tried to drown you," The corner of his lip curled into a sneer as his blue eyes darted towards Choro. The naga hissed and shot a withering look back at the man, not moving from his spot.

"Thanks for the help," I spat out a foul taste in my mouth, "but I'd like for you to leave, Raoul. Choro and I need to have a talk..."

Choro's eyes met mine as I sent him a harsh glare, not moving from my spot as Raoul hesitated to leave. Heaving a sigh, the man stood up and left through the access door before closing it fully.

Choro didn't move.

"I...am appalled at what happened, Choro," I cut in before he had a chance to speak, "I'm going to safely guess that your intention wasn't to try and kill me, but I need to know...

what the hell that was about?!

"

The volume in my voice raised unintentionally, confusion turning into fear and then to anger as the reality of the situation set in. A look of remorse settled on Choro's face as he sat back on his coils, his eyes darting from side to side as he covered his mouth with a hand. After a few moments, Choro looked back to me and lowered his hand to his side.

"I'm sorry, (y/n). I didn't want to drown you, but what you did to me...was

maddening

," Choro dropped his gaze from mine, "The way your fingers pressed on my skin...it was intoxicating..."

He rubbed the side of his neck, as if the thought of my touch was making him feel something.

"It felt amazing and I wanted you--" Choro paused, an uncertain look crossing his face as he raised his eyes towards me again with a red color spreading through his cheeks, "I wanted you to know how that made me feel."

"So, you dragged me into your pool and kissed me on the lips?" I narrowed my eyes in disbelief, "What made you think that was a good idea?"

"Kara told me about it. When we saw each other, he told Oso and I about what you told him in regards to kissing," The blush spread down to his neck, "...and I wanted you to know that I...really admire you. I probably should've done it somewhere else since Kara said that kissing you on the lips may scare you into thinking that I was going to eat you, but it felt really good when I did it...so I kept going until I realized that you weren't breathing anymore."

My anger festered before melting away, placing a hand over my face to hide my aggravated look from Choro.

"Were you really sick or did you just want to get me away from Raoul?"

"No, I wasn't sick," Choro admitted before looking away again, "Your touch was...amazing. I can't really describe it other than it felt like I was on fire. Everything in me...wanted you, so I thought that kissing you would alleviate that feeling, but it only made it grow more."

My other hand covered my face as I connected his words to what he was trying to convey. What I had done during the venom extraction had turned him on...It would explain the weird sudden feverish temperature of his skin afterwards and the thoughts of showing me affection via kissing.

I sucked in a sharp breath.

The other two nagas had gone through the same thing!

I had accidentally aroused them, but Choro was the only one who acted on it.

My hands shifted to the sides of my head, realization heavy on my face as my mind tried to figure out how I was going to apologize to Oso and Kara.

"(Y/n)...?" Choro had moved a little closer, uncertainty on his face as his hand pulled back from its outstretched position.

"Choro, I'm so sorry...!" I looked up towards him, lowering my hands away from my face, "I didn't know it would make you feel that way during the process. I just wanted to help remove as much venom as I was able, and I should've asked if it was okay to touch you there! Oh my gosh, what am I going to do...?"

My mind raced through everything he said, catching that he, Kara, and Oso had talked a few days ago...but I didn't remember them saying a word to each other outside of what we had talked about. Choro flinched back a little bit when we made eye contact, moving away as I stood up to his eye level.

"(Y/n), you're starting to worry--"

"How?" I cut him off, "How did you talk to Oso and Kara?"

"Huh?"

"I don't remember you all talking to each other."

"O-oh..." Choro glanced down to the left for a moment before looking back at me, "It's not with words, per se...more like scents and intentions? It was an easier way for us to talk back on the island. Rather than travelling through different habitats that made us uncomfortable, we developed it to communicate over long distances silently...It only works when we're in the same area, though," I caught his quick glance towards the wall separating his and Oso's enclosure, "The boundaries here make it really hard to do."

My mind reeled from the information, sifting through the jumbled thoughts as I took in everything Choro told me in the last few minutes. The naga brothers had a special way of communicating that couldn't be interpreted by humans, touching their necks was...not a good thing, and they

all

knew the meaning of kissing now. I rubbed my forehead between my first two fingers and thumb, a frown pulling the corners of my lips down.

I was thankful that this had all happened when the zoo was closed to the public, lightly groaning at the panic that probably would've happened. Forget the drama after Choro tried to bite me when he was agitated from the shed, I wouldn't have had a chance to stop the security team from barging in and taking him out.

"Okay...so let me lay it all out..." I lowered my hand from my head and turned back towards him, "You and your brothers have a silent way of communicating while in the same area, touching the side of your neck is something I shouldn't do, and you're..." I struggled for an appropriate word, "You're partially attracted to me."

Choro opened his mouth to say something before closing it and simply nodding his head. I let out a heavy sigh through my nose, the wet feeling of my clothes finally starting to bother me as I paced for a moment.

"I...appreciate the gesture, Choro, but...I'd have a better response to that kind of thing if you talked to me about it first, instead of dragging me into

the water. I thought you were going to kill me by drowning, even if that wasn't your intention. Humans can't hold their breath as long as you can, so...it's not looked upon kindly unless you warn me," I motioned towards my body with both hands, "I'm going to freshen up and get into less wet clothes. I'm not...

mad

at you after hearing your side of why you did it, but please don't do it again, okay?"

"Don't do which part...?" Choro's voice became timid, his tail wrapping around the nearest tree trunk tightly.

"Any of it, for now. Give me some time to think about everything you told me, and I'll come back to talk to you," I pulled at my shirt, feeling the fabric cling to my skin, "I'll still be coming in to take care of food and cleaning your area, but...I'd appreciate some space until I'm ready to talk about what you've told me."

"Sure..." Choro turned away, an understanding look in his eyes as he climbed up the tree, vanishing into the thick canopy with his natural camouflage. I opened the door to see that the back area was devoid of anyone's presence, which meant that Raoul must have already left with the venom.

Shutting the door softly behind me, I stripped off my shirt and tossed it into the sink before doing the same with my pants. Unclasping my bra and slipping off my underwear as I neared the supply closet that was converted into a bathroom, I turned on the weak shower and rinsed off the warm recycled water, letting the fresh water run down my bare body as I slowly went through my thoughts.

'

Boss has all rights to any children you decide to father from the nagas

,' Karl's snide voice called out from my memories, '

If their hemipenes aren't enough for you, I've got a good set all ready to go.

'

I slammed a fist into the tiled wall next to me, silencing his voice and quelling some of my remaining anger. Quickly washing and rinsing my hair and body, I turned off the water as I stepped out, pressing the towel against my face before drying off as much as I could. Taking out a set of clean clothes from my duffle bag in my room, I slipped into clean undergarments before pulling on the clothes: the thin shirt from when I met Jyushi a second time, and stretchable sweatpants. My hair was mostly dry when I finally took a brush to it, taming the tangles and curls that always happened after a shower. Setting the wet clothes and undergarments in the small laundry area, I tossed the towel on top of them, intending to wash everything before I went to bed tonight.

Laying a hand on Jyushi's door lever, I let out another sigh as I let my hand fall off the lever. I'd be running away from my problems if I kept going to Jyushi for every little thing that upset me. Yes, I did enjoy his hugs and the silent curiosity he had when I was with him...but I had two other nagas that I needed to apologize to.

Walking to Kara's enclosure next door, I opened it and stepped in while partially closing the door behind me.

"Kara...?"

"Ah...(y/n)..."

I instantly picked up on the staggered breathing in Kara's voice, hearing him talk from his usual afternoon spot near the back corner opposite of the door. I pushed through the foliage until I spotted the rust-colored tail wrapped around a branch above the walking path.

"Kara, I need to talk to you about what happened," I resisted the urge to reach up and touch his tail, not knowing what kind of mindset he was in.

"There's...nothing that needs to be talked about," His voice came behind me, drawing my attention towards an upper bough.

"Yes, there is. Choro brought it to my attention, and I realized that you, Oso, and he acted in the same way," I watched as Kara pushed some of the smaller branches aside, revealing his face as he met my colored hues with his own, "I didn't mean to make that mistake."

"Mistake...? Ah, you must mean what...happened," Kara lowered himself slowly from his perch, coiling his tail underneath himself as a seat, "It's...really not that big of an issue."

"It is when Choro almost killed me because of what I did," My words drained the heated look on his face in an instant, a mix between anger and worry replacing it as he closed the distance between us. Kara's lips almost curled into a snarl as his eyes darted over my figure, settling briefly on my semi-dry hair before locking eyes with me again.

"What happened? What did Choro do?"

"The same thing that I think you stopped yourself from doing. He just added an impromptu bath with it," I held up a hand when I saw him open his mouth, "It's not his fault, it's my own. I didn't realize that touching the sides of your necks would've had that big of an impact on you guys...You don't need to worry about Choro. He and I have an agreement that will stand until I'm ready to talk to him again."

A flurry of emotions flew through Kara's eyes before he closed them, leaning back onto his coils again and opening his copper hues to give me a neutral look, "If that's what you want, then I'll respect your decision. He...must've told you everything, then?"

"He answered the questions I asked."

"Then...from your scent, he told you that I was the one that gave him the idea," Kara lowered his gaze, "I'm sorry, (y/n). When I saw Oso and Choro, I was so excited to see them just as vibrant as they were on the island and wanted to tell them how you were taking good care of me, as well. The

topic of kissing came up and I told them everything you had told me, but that was the end of it."

"I had wondered where your brothers had gotten the idea from," I crossed my arms over my chest, "Would you have done what Choro did? Would you have kissed me?"

"...yes..."

"To show admiration or respect?" The veiled question was worded with the terms I told him, basically asking if he would kiss the more intimate areas or not.

Kara stayed silent while he turned his head away, a small blush filling his cheeks.

"Admiration, then..." I silently let out a breath, guessing that Oso's answer would probably be the same, "Then I'll extend the agreement between Choro and I to you. I'll still come in to feed you and clean up your area, but give me some time to think about this. I'll approach you when I'm ready to talk about it."

"(Y/n)," Kara called out as I made my way back towards the door, waiting until I looked back to him before continuing, "I'll stay out of your way until you're ready."

The confident look he gave me stirred a warm feeling in my chest, and I gave him a soft smile in response.

Chapter 19

I grunted as my back hit the concrete floor, my shoulders twisting into an uncomfortable position as my hands were pinned above my head. I leveled a glare at the red-haired naga above me, his lips twisted into a coy smirk as his serpentine body pressed down against my legs, making the fragile joints feel every pound of his hefty weight.

"A 'sorry' isn't going to cut it, (y/n)," Oso's forked tongue darted out, the tines spreading wide before lazily slipping back into his mouth, "That may have worked with Choro and Kara, but you forgot about me and grudges."

I twisted my spine to try and pull free from his grip, clenching my teeth in frustration when Oso gave a hooded stare while tightening his hand a little more, refusing to let me go. I had tried to approach the oldest brother with the same mentality as the other two, ashamed that he already had seven grudges against me and wasn't going to listen to a small apology...not when I already owed him so much.

Oso had been waiting for me right inside the access door and I took the opportunity to apologize, only to feel him shove my shoulders against the partially open door and push me to the ground like some kind of prey. He had the same heated look on his face as Kara and Choro had, a dusting of red across his cheeks as his red eyes swept across my face while his lower body adjusted against my own.

"This is the last time I'll forget...!" I shut my mouth as he leaned in close, our noses nearly touching.

"Somehow, I doubt that," Oso's hot breath danced across my lips, "You've already stacked up a long list of dues with me. One for each of my brothers, another for coming to our island and bringing those

humans

there, and yet another for putting us in here."

I shook my head, turning away so I could speak, "Those last two aren't my fault and we both know it. You said that I could get rid of those grudges by trying to find a way to get you all out of here, right? What if I told you I'm halfway there?"

Oso's red-rimmed eyes slightly widened as he pulled away a little bit, "...and?"

"I've secured a ride to your island. The same pilot that dropped me off has a crew willing to take you all back," My voice dropped in volume, cautious of anyone listening in, "I just need to find a way to get you all out of here safely, and you're gone."

"Interesting..." His eyes hooded once more, leaning back in as his tongue flickered over my skin, "...That'll be two grudges taken care of. So what are you going to do for the first six?"

"...I'm getting you all out of here. What more could you want from me?" My eyes narrowed, unsure of what he was talking about. Oso had the hardest personality to figure out, as he kept flipping between being satisfied that I was trying to get them home and being upset that I wasn't doing it fast enough. His tail shifted a little as my knees cried out for relief, drawing a hissed breath between my teeth as his hand finally released my wrists.

"I've been laying by that black wall where I hear the other human voices every so often," His torso settled on top of mine, crossing his arms above my breasts as I became Oso's lounge, "They say the most interesting things sometimes. The most common question is 'is this real?', followed by statements about how my brothers and I are amazing to look at. I hear them almost every day...but there's one thing that stood out to me. Some human had commented about a group of people that were organizing a raid to happen soon, with the same human promising me that she'd get me out and treat me better than you were."

The color drained from my face as my mouth suddenly became dry, suddenly unbothered about the intimate position Oso had put himself in.

"When...did you hear that...?"

"Hmm, probably a few days ago."

"When were you going to tell me this?" I shifted my eyes to look into his own.

"I

was

going to tell you earlier today, but the venom thing happened," His lips turned downwards into a pout, "Besides, it's not that big of a deal. No one's been able to get past the window and I've only seen you with two other people."

"Oso, this

is

a big deal!" I nearly shouted, "If enough people gather under one mindset, then anything can happen! Should anything happen to you all--!"

I pulled my hands to my face, smothering my words before anything else could be said. The nagas had been at the zoo long enough for regular visitors to see that they were capable of human intelligence based on my interactions with them while cleaning their enclosures or feeding them. I had seen the chat boards, the blog posts, and the news articles. People were split about them even existing, and I knew that the extreme animal lovers would try to break the law to free an animal they thought was in danger. It wouldn't be safe to assume that they wouldn't break into a zoo to free the creatures...

"(Y/n)?" Oso asked as he shifted his tail slightly off of my legs, his hands slipping underneath my shoulders and helping me sit up, "You're shaking..."

"Tell me what you would do if someone besides me walked into your area..." I tried to keep the worry out of my voice. There was a potential raid happening, and I had just helped de-fang the venomous nagas of the one thing that could ward someone off.

"If you didn't warn me that someone was coming, then I'd probably treat them like any other threat on the island and probably hide," A thoughtful look crossed his face before meeting my eyes again, "This serious, huh?"

"You know the conditions that keep me here..." I scooted back from him a little, his hands releasing my shoulders and his coils lifting enough to let me move, "If something like that actually happens..."

"...got it," The finality in Oso's voice was almost heartbreaking, knowing that our lives were in each other's hands. His hardened scales slid across the concrete as he made his way further into the back area, my eyes following him as he looked around the area, "There's not many places for you to hide back here, huh...We both know that Jyushi and Choro would be more than happy to hide you away, but it's actually Ichi that I'm worried about."

"Care to explain?" I stood up and adjusted my clothing, moving to stand next to Oso as he looked towards the line of enclosure doors. There were no markings to distinguish which room housed which brother, but I watched as a thoughtful look crossed his face.

"Have you been with him at all after he bit you?"

"No, he's warned me to keep my distance," I rubbed my left hand against my right forearm, still feeling the small grooves that each tooth puncture left in the healed skin.

"It's going to be hard, but I'd like you to try and get him to warm up to you," Oso rubbed a hand against the back of his head, resting the other on his scaled hip, "We're basically your only allies here. The more support you have from us when you need it, the better it will be."

I only raised an eyebrow in partial doubt.

"What?" He looked back towards me, raising his own eyebrow in response.

"I can't figure you out, Oso. One moment, you're pinning me to the floor and angered by what I said, while the next moment you're showing some concern about me. What's with you?"

"Oh, I'm sorry. Does the safety of my brothers not matter to you?" Oso scoffed, "You're the one that freaked out just seconds ago that this 'raid' thing could be dangerous, and now you're questioning

me

because I'm taking the threat seriously?"

"Of course it matters to me," My brow furrowed in conviction, "You know the stakes here, so I don't want anything to happen to you or your brothers!"

"Is that the only reason? Because if one of us is harmed then it's your life on the line?"

"No, it's because I actually like all of you and I want to see you free again, not locked up in these cages!"

Oso tilted his down a little, his hairline creating a shadow across his eyes as a satisfied smirk grew on his lips. I covered my mouth with my hands, realization turning into embarrassment.

"No...wait..." I verbally tried to backpedal, but I couldn't figure out what to say instead.

It was the truth. Despite the small incidents and the recent events, I had grown to like the nagas in all of their flaws. I wasn't sure if it was because I was their only lifeline in America or if it was a genuine connection, but the feeling had grown when I spent time with them talking about different things and learning their mannerisms and unique tics. I never gave the feeling a label because I knew that everything we had would be all over when they left the helicopter, my promise to them fulfilled. The brothers wouldn't have much of a reason to keep me alive if I tried to stay with them on their island, so I had always pushed it away as a temporary feeling.

"I may be locked up in a cage, but whenever you come in, I can always smell their happiness on you...no matter how hard you try to wash it away," Oso's breath caressed my ear as his arms wrapped around my shoulders from behind. I lowered my hands to see that he had completely surrounded

me, his coils shifting comfortably around my legs and waist while his chest rested against my back.

"I can't do this, though..." I felt a lump form in my throat, "A keeper isn't supposed to treat their charge like this..."

"We've never thought of you as our 'keeper'. It's a dumb title that someone thought they could use to make you obey," His voice was clear and certain, "No...we think of you as someone that we can trust, someone that sees us for who we are and not what we look like. If we didn't give a shit about you, then Choro and I wouldn't have tried to help you free the others on the island."

"But Todo and Ichi..."

"That's why you need to convince them that you're on their side," Oso rested his cheek against mine, the tender move taking me by surprise, "They're going to be stubborn, but I know they'll come around like the rest of us have. Don't worry about us if this 'raid' thing happens, all right?"

"You're so confusing, Oso..."

"I thought I was being straightforward."

"No, not that..." I glanced over towards him, "You're so back and forth about things that it's hard to get a read on you."

"You're still stuck on that?" Oso released my shoulders as a wide smirk rested on his lips, "Maybe I just like confusing you."

"Then I guess I'll have to deal with it," I pressed my hands against his bare chest before pushing him back lightly, "Now get back into your area. You've been out here long enough."

"Right, right," He laughed before unwinding his body from mine, smoothly gliding over to his enclosure, "Maybe I'll be more forward when we're out of here."

I heard the lighting system in the enclosures switch from the daylight hours to nighttime, finishing up the last bit of laundry from earlier and sliding the clean clothes onto hangers before hanging them on the drying pole I had set up.

After I had closed Oso's door, I was left alone with my thoughts as time slowly ticked on. I knew that Todo was probably going to be easier to befriend than Ichi, considering the older of the two still blamed a lot of what happened on me despite the attempt at reconciliation earlier. Todo wouldn't be as much of a challenge since we were on better speaking terms than Ichi and myself, but his nasty habit of treating me like dirt would be hard to get past.

Dressing down to my pajamas, I climbed into the bed and pulled the laptop out from its hidden charging place, setting the device on my stomach. Logging onto my new e-mail account, I didn't see anything new from Jeff or the exotics department, so I continued browsing the internet for hints about a supposed raid on the San Diego Zoo. Nothing seemed to match whatever keywords I put into the search bar, only pulling up the blogs and forums that I had seen before.

The corners of my lips pressed down in a frown as I turned the laptop off, sliding it back into its hiding spot. With something that big, I would've thought that finding a page that had details and organized plans for such a thing...but maybe it wasn't on the public internet.

I turned over in the bed, facing the wall as I tucked my left arm underneath the pillow.

There was a food delivery scheduled for tomorrow, which meant another public feeding. After the nagas were fed, then I'd have time after the zoo closed to talk with Ichi and Todo.

My mind began to feel sluggish as sleep took over.

Tomorrow was my chance to get to know them more.

Chapter 20

I sat up in the bed, an uneasy feeling consuming my tired mind as I pulled on some more appropriate clothes before stepping out into the back area. The soft whirring from the heating machinery indicated that it was still nighttime, drawing a yawn from me while I rubbed the sleep out of my eyes. Grabbing a small cup from one of the cupboards and filling it with water, I leaned against the prep table and stared out towards the doors of the enclosures.

Soft hissing came from a few of them, one of them louder than the others. I stared harder at the enclosure closest to me, wondering if Ichi was sleeping right against the door before I noticed that the door was open a little bit.

Swallowing the rest of the water, I put the cup down gently and made my way towards Ichi's enclosure, hearing a voice whisper beyond the door. Taking in a deep breath and pulling the door open the rest of the way, I saw three figures slowly approach the lavender naga pressing himself against the far wall, his hissing growing louder as I stepped into the room.

"Come on, we'll take you home," A feminine voice called out softly, "We're not here to hurt you."

"Get away from him!" I shouted out as loudly as I could, seeing them flinch away from me while I approached, my adrenaline spiking. If these three were the ones that Oso heard talking about the raid then I couldn't afford to mess around, "You're trespassing onto private property! Leave before I alert the authorities."

Ichi's hisses lessened a little, using my distraction to back away towards the rear wall and dive into cover. The low light of the enclosure made it hard to see the details of their faces, but I could tell that the three were female.

"You're the one that keeps these poor people hostage!" Another voice called out, one of the three approaching me, "You should be put in jail for ripping

them away from their homes and shoving them into the spotlight."

The enclosure lights flickered on and I caught the last bit of a lavender-scaled tail passing through the open door, moving to keep myself between the women and the door.

"You don't understand what you're talking about. If you want to free them the proper way, start by signing a petition."

"Of course we know what we're talking about. You kidnap these men, brainwash them into thinking that they're something they're not, and parade them around in scale suits for everyone to see while you get to reap the benefits," The last woman spoke up, sounding and looking a lot younger than the other two, "Even if they aren't real nagas, you're still guilty of abuse!"

"She doesn't abuse us," I heard Ichi's voice growl out behind me, seeing the three women react in shock to something, "You're as ignorant as everyone else outside that wall."

"I'll free you!" A new male voice called out as Ichi screeched in pain, making me turn around quickly to see a young man digging a pocket knife into Ichi's waistline, the angled blade biting down between the line of scales and skin as he tried to pry off the scales.

"Ichi!" I rushed towards him, grabbing the young man before pulling him off of the writhing naga. The young man looked pale, shocked at some realization that he clearly wasn't expecting, "Why would you do that?!"

"It's real--" His brown eyes were wide.

"Ichi!" I shoved the man to the ground from my arms, focusing on the wounded naga who had pulled the knife out and completely retreated into the back area, his hisses loud and agitated.

Someone grabbed onto my shoulder and pulled back, spinning me towards them before a closed fist collided with my jawline.

Staggered for a moment, I tried to raise my arms in front of my face before the volley of punches and kicks landed on me, knocking me to the ground while the attackers spewed out insults and slurs. Adrenaline flooded my nerves as I tried to stand back up under the blows, feeling someone pull at my hair and yanking my head up before a foot slammed its booted toes into my throat.

It became very hard to breathe in an instant, my vision swirling with colors and static as I hit the ground once more. Everything slowly faded into black, the lack of oxygen taking its toll on my brain.

The sound of someone screaming woke me up, muffled by something between my ears and the source of the cry.

My throat hurt, my mouth tasted of iron and copper, and I couldn't see very well out of my right eye. I tried to lift my hand up a little, feeling movement underneath my hand as my fingertips traced out rough diamond-shaped patterns along the hard surface.

Another sound came from above me, two figures leaning into view as the noise grew closer. They looked towards each other before one looked away while the other leaned closer to me, the black hair spotted with pink dots catching my eye first. A hand waved gently in front of my eyes, the movement becoming clearer as my eyes managed to focus.

A worried look was obvious on Todo's face, his eyes meeting my own for a brief moment before turning away to call someone. The second figure came back into view, the pale lavender hair hard to miss as Ichi's hooded gaze flickered over my face before turning away again.

I slowly moved each limb, feeling the muscles protest from the abuse they'd received. Moving from my legs to my arms before testing out my back, I simply lay on whatever I was placed on, absentmindedly running a finger along the diamond grooves.

Sound returned to my ears for a brief moment, a strangled cry tearing through the air before silence blanketed everything again.

"Ichi...Todo..." It hurt to speak, feeling something shift in my throat before I became worried of what was broken, "What happened--?"

"(Y/n), you've been hurt," Todo moved a little closer, his hand hesitantly reaching out before being pulled back near his head, "We don't know what to do..."

"You didn't need to do that, you know," Ichi's voice was stern, almost scolding, as he narrowed his eyes at me, "I could handle myself."

"Then...I'll keep that in mind for the future," Swallowing was tough to do, which meant that my throat was heavily bruised. I felt so tired, but my limbs were still responding to movement and I forced myself to sit up. I only moved a few inches before two hands pinned my shoulders to the ground, staring up at Ichi as he kept me still.

"Don't...move just yet," A flurry of emotions raced behind his dark hues, "My brothers...you'll recover more quickly if you stay still."

"I don't heal like you all do...I need medical attention, Ichi," My eyes stung as I started to plead with him. While my body was still responsive, something bad could've happened during the beating I received and I may not last long if it was left alone, "...please...!"

Ichi pulled back a little in uncertainty, his teeth biting down on his bottom lip as he looked towards Todo before turning away. Some of the ground pulled away underneath me before I felt a pair of arms hold me up, supporting the back of my shoulders and tucking underneath my knees while the motion let me lay my head against someone's shoulder. My eyes caught the faint yellow coloration of scales along his chest before they were too heavy to keep open.

I heard distant talking, a thick fog swirling around in my head as I tried to open my eyes. The muffled conversation became clearer, sounding like three different people.

One had a thick southern accent, more than likely Calmine...

The second was a female voice, rising in pitch every so often like she was trying to make a point or to argue against whatever was being said.

The third was another male, the tone never raising or lowering in opposition.

It almost hurt to open my eyes as I could only see a layout of starch white ceiling tiles through my left eye. There was something covering my right eye, but my mind slowly regained control of my body and figured out what I could and couldn't move. Fingers and toes were fine, wrists and ankles were okay, legs and arms moved a few centimeters after a struggle.

"Mr. Calmine..." It was hard to hear me speak, my throat felt absolutely raw from being abused.

The conversation stopped and the man holding my figurative chains walked closer to wherever I was laying, looking down at me with a small look of disdain.

"They're innocent," I tried to speak with conviction despite my voice sounding like a bag of rocks, "Whatever it is, they didn't do it and only responded to the intruders in the only way they knew how."

"Weh'll speak more of this latah," Calmine's frown deepened, turning away from me to face the other two, "Ah'll leave her in yawr care for the nex' few days."

He walked away, leaving me alone with the other two people. I took the small respite from his presence to glance around the room, seeing that I was in a hospital room, laying on a wheeled bed and covered in sterilized blankets.

"Ms. (Y/n)?" The female voice brought my attention back to the people now standing next to the bed. Both were dressed in white lab coats, with their keycards proudly clipped to the breast pocket lip. The female looked

to be an attending doctor while the male's keycard sleeve labelled him as a resident.

"Mhmm?"

"My name is Carol. I'm your attending doctor while you're here, and this is Richard," She motioned a hand towards the male, "He's one of the residents here on the floor. Do you remember what brought you here?"

"Fight...got kicked in the throat," I gave concise details, not sure what Calmine had talked about with them.

"The good news is that nothing is broken," Richard spoke up, "There is a small hairline fracture along your left femur, but it's not in danger of widening unless you put undue strain on it. While your trachea does have heavy bruising, the x-ray didn't show anything that had been severely damaged. The iris in your right eye is torn a bit, but the optometrist said that it shouldn't affect your sight besides a slightly heightened sensitivity to light for a few weeks while it heals itself."

"So...bedrest?"

"That about sums it up," He gave a soft smile.

"The bruising has a potential to rise to the surface of the skin within a few days, but we can safely say that there's nothing to worry about," Carol spoke up, "We had heard a little bit from the paramedics about what had happened. Is there anything that we should know that wasn't covered?"

I coughed a little before swallowing, "No, not really. The damage done to me was purely done with human hands and feet."

"All right," She gave a confident smile, "Just ring the bell for the nurse if you're in need of anything."

Carol and Richard left the room, closing the heavy door behind them as I watched them through the interior viewing windows.

With a heavy sigh, I pushed one of the buttons near my hand along the safety panel to move the bed into more of a sitting position, reaching for the TV remote and flicking through the channels before settling on absentmindedly watching a soft-spoken man guide the viewer through various artistic techniques.

Bedrest for a few days -- meaning that the nagas would probably be dealing with someone else during that time if Calmine even assigned someone to do my job. If not, then they'd miss their feeding day.

Thinking back on it, there really wasn't a day when I never interacted with the brothers. I had always found some excuse to go into their enclosures to either clean, check their water levels, check the heating bulbs, or feed them. Their company was enjoyable...and I feared that events out of my control had doomed them.

Yes, I was furious with the people that trespassed and disrupted everything that I had been working to correct, inserting their own agendas onto something that didn't need to be disturbed. This could ruin everything, and probably did from how Calmine had looked at me.

I feared for what was going to happen to the nagas when I wasn't there.

Chapter 21

Three days I was kept in the hospital bed, with no contact from anyone at the zoo.

Three days that I was worried sick about the nagas that I had dragged from the safety of their home.

Three days without eating much, and without a constant sleep schedule.

As soon as I was given clearance to leave, a taxi was called to pick me up and I was driven to the San Diego Zoo. I was expecting people to be demonstrating outside the gates, calling for the release of the nagas after the raid had gone so horribly. When the taxi passed by the entrances, there wasn't much of a protest crowd besides the usual 'all animals deserve to be free' sign every now and then. My stomach turned over with the new fear of finding the naga enclosures empty, signs posted that they'd been moved to quarantine due to something.

I was let out by a small entrance located near the back of the private employee lot, watching the taxi drive off as I waited by the door for someone to let me in. Soon enough, one of the men from Calmine's office opened the door and escorted me in, a heavy hand guiding me by my shoulder through the office and taking me through the busy zoo walkways until we got to the reptile house. Pressing the down button on the elevator, he pushed me into the elevator car when it arrived, swiping his keycard to allow him onto the lower floors.

"What am I coming home to?" I didn't look at him when the question slipped past my lips. He didn't answer when the elevator stopped on the lowest floor, opening to the familiar back room.

I heard someone shout out from one of the enclosures, the placement marking it as Todo's room. Shoving off the man's hand, I rushed towards the open door and ducked into the enclosure.

The atmosphere I had walked into shifted from completely unpleasant to surprise as I saw Todo halt his approach towards a female wearing a zoo uniform. He turned towards me with hostility before the anger melted into shock.

"(Y/n)...?" He sounded uncertain, his dark hues taking in the details of my remaining bandages around my face, my right eye completely blocked from view by a thick eyepatch that kept light out. My cheeks were patched up with some light gauze, and the bruises that had spread around my neck were dark purple with the edges turning a little green.

"Todo--" I was cut off as he suddenly rushed me, his arms holding me close as we fell to the ground from his momentum, his tail almost wrapping around my lower half.

"(Y/n), we were so worried about you!" Todo pressed his face into the crook of my neck, a rapid light flicking on the skin indicating that he was taking in every new bit of information he could about where I had been, "It was so boring without you here, and this

human

they tried to get us to be friendly with was absolutely

unbearable!

"

"Hey, no! Don't kill her!" The female cried out, running over as I could hear the panic in her voice. As her fingers touched Todo's scales, he twisted his head towards her and let a loud hiss escape his lips, bearing his teeth while tightening his hug around me.

"Todo, stop..." I tried to motion for her to back away, "I'm back now, and I'm alive."

"You wouldn't be here if you were dead," Todo huffed as he pressed himself back into my neck, "...dummy..."

"I could be a zombie, you never know."

"No, you're warm and have a heartbeat," His response was quick, "Anything dead is cold and lifeless."

"You got me there...am I able to get up?" I looked down as much as I could towards Todo, seeing his dark hues flick up towards me, "Just let me do a few things before you get too comfortable, all right?"

His face switched from relief to realization, pulling away from me and settling into his usual standoffish position, "Fine...it's not like I was looking forward to you coming back.

She's

more fun than you ever were."

"Right...you can tell me all about it through your verbal assaults later," I stood up and followed the employee out of the enclosure, closing the door behind us before she gripped my shoulders tightly.

"(Y/n), I thought you were joking! I'm so sorry about everything that you go through every day!"

"Sasha?" I raised an eyebrow at her near-panicked expression, "They had you working down here in my place?"

"I volunteered...but nevermind that! These nagas are

awful

!" The verbal stream couldn't be stopped as she shook me with almost every pointed word, "I thought they'd be nice to me considering that you said nothing but good things about them, but they were horrible to work with! They wouldn't eat, wouldn't move from their spots when the cages needed cleaning...how did you do it?"

"...I ask nicely..." I recovered from the shaking long enough to say a few words, placing a hand over hers and pulling it away from my shoulder, "If

you just went in with the expectation that you'd get the same treatment as me, then of course you would be in for a rough ride. I'm the only one they really know here."

"But they seemed so calm when you were in their enclosures!" Sasha followed me as I went to check on the stock in the refrigerator, finding it full of packaged raw meat.

"They haven't eaten yet?"

"Like I said, they've refused to eat!" She groaned as she leaned against the prep table, watching me pull out the slabs that she had already opened. They were cut into appropriate sizes, so that wasn't the reason why, "The retic said that he wouldn't eat until you were back."

Retic was short for 'reticulated'...

Jyushi.

I rubbed my forehead with my clean hand, looking back towards the enclosure doors, "Have any of them eaten?"

"No," Sasha shook her head.

"Damn..." I bit my bottom lip. If I fed them now, they'd probably be too over-excited to keep anything down, "Anything else I need to know before getting back to work?"

"Not really..."

"Any news about what happened a few days ago?"

"What? About your bad fall?"

My what?

"Yeah...nothing sprouted from that, did it?" I played along. If there was a cover-up, I wasn't going to be the one that removed it.

"No, not really. Just the standard procedure for work-related injuries. They said that they needed someone experienced with the nagas since you were going to be absent for a few days, and I volunteered to work the shift," Sasha stood back up as I rested six food buckets on the prep table, watching me as I divided the meat to warm up, "The staircase you fell down had already hurt a few other people this year, so management is looking into it."

"Sounds like they knew about it already," Giving a small nod, I didn't dismiss the rumor, "You said that the nagas were pretty bossy about stuff."

"Well, stubborn is the better word, I think," She pressed a finger against her chin, looking up towards the high ceiling, "They wouldn't come out from hiding the first day, and were upset when I found them while cleaning up the substrate. The blue insularis didn't seem as mad as the others, and I learned real quick to be cautious around the red-headed krait."

"Kara and Oso," I put the names to the species she had labelled them as, taking mental notes on how to enter each enclosure.

"I think I had the easiest time with the green mamba, surprisingly. They usually have a temper."

"Choro."

"Ah, sorry..."

"No worries. They probably didn't mention their names to you, so don't worry about messing it up," I shook my head slightly, "Anything else before I get back to work?"

"No, that's it," Sasha made her way towards the double doors that led to the security office, "I'll, uh, let you get back to it. I'm willing to work the next shift you have off, whenever you want a vacation...I'll be more gentle next time."

"All right," I gave her a wave before the doors closed behind her, leaving me alone in the back room once more. Leaning against the prep table for a little bit, I organized my thoughts in silence.

The raid that had happened wasn't made public, with my injuries attributed towards a nasty fall down the stairs. Calmine probably had to pay a pretty fortune to shut up the news, which was going to come back to me getting punished for it, but I wasn't sure how that explained away Ichi's injur-

Ichi!

I quickly turned around and pulled open the door to his enclosure, ducking inside to see the familiar tail trailing towards the back corner, where there was a small pond for him to soak in out of sight from the black window. Ensuring that my shoes were making noise against the dry leaves along the ground, I slowly made my way towards where I heard water move around.

"Ichi? It's (y/n)," Calling out softly, I looked around the large 'log' that kept the pond from public view.

Ichi was almost crawling into the pond when I saw him, his arms fully submerged as he looked back towards me. Seeing the angry red stab wound on his waistline, my lips drew into a deep frown, drawing his attention to what I was seeing.

"It's nothing to worry about," His voice sounded dismissive, turning from his intention of getting into the pond.

"It looks like it's something I need to be worried about a little bit," I only took a few steps closer before kneeling down to get a better look at it, "I'd just like to look at it. If it passes my inspection, then I won't bother you about it ever again."

He hesitated a little bit before laying down on the side that wasn't injured, letting me get close and looking at the wound.

The pocket knife had bit down deep, rocking back and forth a little from the struggle before I had pulled the guy off. The wound itself didn't look terrible, but the scales right next to it had suffered some damage from the blade and the skin was clearly agitated.

"May I touch it?"

I only got a grunt as a response, taking it as a 'proceed with caution' warning as my fingers danced around the outline of the redness. The skin was angry from the wound, but it was still in the process of healing up and would probably take a few shedding cycles before it was completely gone. I'd have to keep an eye on it to make sure that it didn't become infected.

"Yeah, you're good to soak," I backed away, letting Ichi continue with his soaking ritual, "If it starts to really hurt, let me know."

"Sure..." He confirmed before dunking his head underwater. I left him alone since there was nothing that I needed to fret over, closing the door and taking a deep breath before moving two doors down from Ichi.

I unlocked the door and it swung open by itself, the massive reticulated naga pushing against it. When the door was fully open, I watched in amusement as Jyushi realized the door had stopped moving, sliding down from his shoving position and turning his head around to see me, his entire face lighting up like a child seeing Santa Claus for the first time.

"(Y/n)!" I braced for the solid hug that he always gave, wrapping me up and falling to the ground with such a force that it made me wonder if he ever hurt himself from landing on his elongated spine.

"Hey, Jyushi...!" I tried to hug him back as much as I could before I gave up and just let him hold me tightly, "Sorry about being gone for a few days."

"We were so worried about you!" His head tucked into the same spot Todo had pressed against, going through the same motion that the younger did, "When we saw you get taken away by those humans, I didn't know if we'd ever see you again!"

"Sorry, Jyushi..." I moved my head to 'hug' him as much as I could, my arms now effectively pinned by the excited naga, "I got beat up pretty bad, so I wanted to make sure that I was okay before coming back."

"By those mean humans?"

"The three women and guy from a few nights ago, yeah."

Jyushi became oddly quiet, his scales shifting a little before his tongue danced across my skin.

"...Jyushi?"

"Distracted...I'm not going to get into trouble for being out here, am I?" The tines of his tongue hovered over the eyepatch as he moved to get a good look at it.

"I don't care at this point..." I commented tiredly, "You probably will, but it's not going to be as bad as what happened then."

"Then I'll bring you into my room," His usual smile settled on his face, replacing the studious look that was resting on it previously, "If you're able to?"

"Would you...mind if I declined on that offer for now?" I looked towards the other doors, "I still need to check up on the rest of your brothers."

"Okay," The smile widened, "Then after?"

"How about this? After I check up on everyone and make sure you all eat, I'll come spend the night with you," I held his gaze as Jyushi slowly unwound from my body, "After the last few nights, I want to make sure I get some sleep."

It was like I asked him what he wanted for whatever he counted as his birthday.

His eyes widened and the grin became impossibly bigger as he nodded his head enthusiastically.

"I make a really good bed!"

"I believe you," I reached up and rested a hand on his head, stopping his excited movement, "I'll be back in your room for food, and then again before the lights go out tonight."

"I'll be waiting for you," Jyushi reached out both arms and pressed his hands against my cheeks, squishing my mouth a little, "Both times!"

"Shoundsh good," I laughed as he became fixated on what my lips were doing, pressing and releasing his hands in a fast rhythm, "Okay, that's enough."

"Sorry!" He pulled away and quickly ducked into his enclosure once more, giving me a large smile as I closed the door and locked it.

Three down, three to go.

Chapter 22

With Kara's enclosure right next to Jyushi's, I took a deep breath before opening the enclosure door and stepping inside. While Sasha had said that Kara wasn't as mad as the others, I still needed to be cautious. The older three nagas had been through a rough week, from draining their venom and accidentally finding out about one of their more sensitive areas, to a surprise raid that ended in my injuries.

I had no idea if the other nagas were injured, and I didn't know what Ichi had done when he left his enclosure.

"Kara, I'm back," I called out to the faux jungle, looking for any signs of movement as I walked down the footpath.

"I thought you weren't going to approach me until you were ready."

Kara's voice came from above me, drawing my attention upwards as a branch was moved aside to reveal the blue insularis naga. He was laying on a loose pile of coils, the posture telling me that he was completely relaxed for the moment.

It took me a few seconds to realize that he was talking about the aftermath of the venom extraction incident.

"I'm more worried about making sure that you're okay," I looked back up at him, holding his copper hues, "Were you hurt at all a few nights ago?"

"Not as badly as you."

"Am I able to see where you were hurt?"

"It's not physical," He laughed a little, "My hearts did hurt a little when I saw them take you away, but it's better now that I know you're back...despite how your own injuries look."

"The bruise will go away on its own, but the eyepatch is staying on for another few weeks," I lightly rested my right palm over the aforementioned bandage, "Just consider me to be blind on my right side while it's on."

"Will you be able to see with only one eye?" Kara shifted on his coils, moving from laying on his chest to resting on his right side.

"I can still see things, but my depth perception is completely gone," I lowered my hand as my smile faded from my lips, "You said that you saw them take me away...what happened after I was gone?"

"I don't know who opened my door but when I took a look out into that back area, I realized that Todo had given you over to the humans with weapons. We were told to get back into our 'cages' shortly after by the same group of humans, with Jyushi putting up the most fight before Oso told him to listen to them," He let an arm hang down, his fingers barely brushing against my hair for a moment before curling into a loose fist, "The next day is when that other human came in, another female. She tried to act like you, and I guess that made my brothers a bit more agitated."

"She said that you weren't as mad. Was it because of the others' agitation?"

"I figured that the human needed some form of respite from their anger, so I withheld mine and let her have some breathing room here," Kara took in a breath before letting it all out in a sigh, "Not sure if that was a mistake or not, considering that she kept trying to talk to me or ask me questions about who I was and where I had come from."

"I don't think she meant any harm from it," I slowly reached up to touch his lowered hand, looking at the teal-blue scales underneath the skin, "When I had met her, she was adamant about meeting all of you, but seemed to have an innocent curiosity about it."

"There's curiosity, and then there's whatever she had."

"Why? What happened?" I shifted my gaze up his arm to meet his copper hues, a playful look about them before he looked away. I dropped my hand from his, just in case I did something wrong.

"When I think of curiosity, I think of you and how you act when you think I'm doing something weird. It's a tempered look that knows you can't just dive all in, touching something without permission or invading their space without warning. I'm not sure if your language has a word for it, but she wanted to see me up close and tried to convince me to come closer to her..." His voice trailed off in thought, "She kept saying that you gave her permission to do your job, which made me think that you were never coming back..."

"No, Kara!" I shook my head before locking eyes with him once more, "I'd never abandoned you or your brothers here. I'm sorry to hear that she lied to you about me..."

"I know you wouldn't, considering that flower on your throat was from protecting Ichi," Kara lowered himself to the ground right in front of me, his lower half curling around us as he reached out and lightly ran a thumb over the bruise, "He still blames himself for what happened to you, apparently."

"You can smell him, huh..." I felt his thumb lightly outline the bruise, revealing to me how big it actually was, "I visited him earlier because I was worried about his stab wound. It seemed to be healing all right, but it'll take a while for it to be completely gone."

"Then you saw the people that attacked you."

"Yeah...just a couple of humans that somehow got in and thought that they could help you all escape from here," His hand pulled away from my neck and I glanced off to the side, "I'm going to get you home, Kara...you and your brothers."

"I know you will," I heard him take in a deep breath before quickly turning away, heading towards the small water feature he used to drink from, "Choro and Oso have been worried about you, so you better go check on them."

"Right," I watched him leave, "I'll be back later to feed you."

He only glanced back towards me with a smile on his lips. Letting myself out of his enclosure and closing the door behind him, I pressed a hand to my throat to feel the still-tender area. I almost laughed when Kara had called it a 'flower', appreciating his word much more than the ugly sound that 'bruise' made.

Taking a small break to grab a glass of water, I focused on the two left doors of the enclosures.

Choro and Oso. I had left both nagas in a less-than-kind manner after that milking incident, but I needed to let them know that I was okay...and I wanted to know if they were okay, as well. Skipping over Oso's enclosure for now, I pulled open the green naga's door.

"Choro? It's (y/n)," I spotted the brightly colored green naga leaning over the 'river', barely in view from where I was standing. He quickly reared up and looked over towards me, his dark eyes wide in surprise as water dripped down his chin.

"(Y/n), you're back!" He cried out, his voice torn between relief and surprise as he lunged out towards me, his arms outstretched. I braced myself as he enveloped me in a hug, the force not throwing me down to the ground like Todo and Jyushi had, but it was enough to push me back a little as he clung to me, "I've been so worried about you..."

"Despite my looks, I'm doing all right, Choro," I returned the hug, smiling a little as his face pressed into the side of my neck, "I've already let most of the others know that I'm here, as well."

"Those humans didn't hurt you too badly, did they?" Choro pulled back just enough to look me in the eyes, "I wouldn't have turned you over like Todo did. I would've kept you safe!"

"No, I asked him to do that," I tilted my head forward a little, letting our foreheads touch briefly before pulling back, "I was worried about my injuries and Todo didn't know what else to do to help me."

"Why would you

want

to be taken by those armed humans?!" His hands shifted from around my shoulders to holding my cheeks, cupping them gently as his eyes danced across my face to try and find some unseen reason.

"The humans with weapons didn't do anything to me, and I knew that they'd focus on my safety regardless if you all were willing to help me or not," I gave Choro a reassuring smile, "What I wasn't planning was being away for three days."

Choro closed his mouth into a strained frown, bringing my head back towards his and pressing our foreheads together once more, "I hated not seeing you...The way that other human acted when she was in here was infuriating because it just kept reminding me of

you

."

"I'm sure she didn't mean any harm by it," I rested my hands on his, feeling the light bumps where the scales grew just underneath the skin.

Silence filled the distance between us, the air ventilation system quietly pumping in the background as we stood still.

"May I...?" Choro's voice was tense, immediately cutting off his words as he swallowed hard. I closed my eyes, knowing exactly what he was trying to imply.

"...not yet," I felt his hands slowly fall from my cheeks, allowing me to move away, "Give me until tomorrow, and I'll have my answer."

"Tomorrow..." Choro repeated before lifting his head up, his dark green eyes meeting my own colored hues as a smile turned his lips upwards, "I can wait until then."

"Did you want me to leave?" I pointed towards the entrance door, "If you'd rather me go, then-"

"No, you can stay," His lower half wound over itself in wide loops, "I just got ahead of myself in the moment."

"You're not too far ahead of yourself. You asked me before doing anything, so I know that you listened during our last conversation."

"I guess..."

"Choro, I actually want to ask you a question," I waited until he looked back towards me, his expression now showing curiosity, "Did you see anything before I was handed over to the other humans?"

"Not really, no. I know that Ichi opened the door you always come through, but he just stared at me before leaving to go somewhere else," Choro shook his head, raising a hand to push some of his green hair behind his ear, "He didn't say anything to me, but Ichi was definitely panicked about something. I realized what it was when Todo carried you out a few minutes later."

"Okay..." I drifted off into thought, knowing that Ichi and Todo were probably with me the entire time I was knocked out. Kara and Choro both said they didn't leave their enclosures, while Jyushi had acted a little weird when I mentioned the four people that intruded. The only one left to ask was Oso, but I had a funny feeling that he wouldn't give me a direct answer unless I managed to somehow corner him in the conversation.

If the nagas really hadn't done anything, then why was I woken up by screaming?

I told Choro that I'd be back to feed him in a little while, excusing myself before closing his door behind me.

Finishing off the water from earlier and tossing the cup into the sink for washing later, I stood in front of Oso's door with a slight frown on my face.

This was the naga that Sasha had said she had to be cautious around, and the only brother that knew exactly what my predicament was here. Pulling the door open, I heard a soft hiss in the direction of the 'river' and closed the door behind me.

"Oso, I'm back."

"So I've heard," I saw the back of his head first, most of his body fully submerged in the moving water, "If I know you just a little bit, I'm your last visit."

I gave him a hum of acknowledgement as he tilted his head back to look at me, his red hair falling back as gravity pulled it down. If Sasha hadn't told me that she needed to be cautious around him, I wouldn't have known that he was in a foul mood. I watched silently as his forked tongue flicked out of his mouth, our eyes focused on each other.

"I suppose I owe you some gratitude," Oso turned himself around, crossing his arms over the embankment and resting his head on them, "For what you did for Ichi."

"I did what I could."

"You could've just gone back to bed, or let them do what they wanted to him."

"Yeah, I could've," I narrowed my eyes, "But I didn't. I heard something different and went to check it out, found three people in his room and told them to get out. Ichi left, came back, got stabbed, and I ended up in the hospital."

"Sounds like an exciting night."

"What is with you?" I furrowed my brow in confusion, "You're the one that warned me of this happening, and now it seems like what happened didn't even phase you. Your brother was attacked, and you're not even yelling at me for allowing that to happen."

"Because I know the humans that did this got what was coming to them," Oso shifted his weight to lean on his arms, moving up a little while keeping eye contact with me, "Yes, I'm angry at the events that happened. Yes, I'm upset that you were taken from us. Yes, I'm happy that you're back. Life moves on."

"What do you mean? What happened to them?" I stared at Oso, uncertainty settling on my face as I registered the phrasing he used.

Oso gave a small sigh before locking his red-and-black eyes on mine, a deadly intent swirling in the dark shade, "I

killed

them."

Chapter 23

I waited for Oso to say something else, for him to crack a smile and say that he was kidding about what he said.

It never came.

My surprise twisted into horror as the seconds passed by, unable to look away from the krait naga who began moving towards me, his red-and-black eyes staring right into my own colored hues as I took a few steps back from him. I felt terrified of him -- more scared than when I thought he was going to kill me on the island. My mental image of the smiling red-headed naga who liked to joke about things was torn asunder, replaced by the reality I faced.

Oso...was a

monster

. He always was, but I was taken in by the innocent-looking face that was now leering down at me, his predatory eyes regarding me like I was some kind of prey as the feeling in the air grew heavy with tension. Some small part of me didn't want it to be true, that this entire thing was just an act that he was doing for some twisted reason, but the deadly intent I saw in his eyes had spread to his face and that small wish shriveled into dust.

"Oso--" I cried out as I tripped over something, falling down into the undergrowth of his enclosure. Oso reared over me, his eyes intensely focused on mine as I felt tears start to run down my cheeks, "Why would you do that...? Why would you kill them?!"

"You already know why!" His eyes flashed with anger, slamming his hands down above my shoulders and digging his fingers deep into the dirt, "You'd think I'd let those worthless vermin get away with harming my brothers?!"

I bit down a scream as I raised my hands over my face in self-defense, putting up a small barrier between the furious naga and myself. I knew that it didn't matter to the naga if my hands were in the way or not, "You promised...! You promised me that you wouldn't kill anyone!"

"I told you on my island that I would do what any animal would when protecting their family!" Oso's voice grew louder, startling me as he began to shout at me for the first time, "If you think that I'd just sit back and watch

disgusting

creatures like you wound my brothers, then you're sadly mistaken about who I am!"

Silence grew between us as I registered his pointed words, sucking in my bottom lip and biting it to keep from crying out loud. His lips twisted into a nasty snarl, revealing his pointed teeth and the two gaps where his fangs were still folded back.

"I refuse to give your measly promise any length of thought. If words were all it took for creatures like you to leave my family alone, we would've been home by now," Oso's voice deepened into a growl as his head lowered to mine, using his chin to shove my hands aside as I tried to get some space between us, "You've got until the end of the week."

"But Oso...!"

"Did I not speak your language?!" His teeth snapped together mere inches from my face, the sound resonating in my ears like bones cracking apart, "Either you find a way out for us, or we're leaving on our own."

"Fine!" I screamed in response, closing my eyes tightly as I couldn't fight back the tears or cry in my voice, "I'll do it...! Just leave me alone...!"

It was a long while before I heard him move away from me, not saying a word further as the noises around me stopped. When I opened my eyes, I was alone where I had fallen. Scrambling up and out of Oso's enclosure, I

slammed the door shut before falling to the concrete floor, my mind and emotions reeling from the unexpected confrontation.

I don't know how long I cried on the ground.

Finally able to take a deep breath without sniffling, I blinked a few times before wiping my palms over my eyes. Settling the eyepatch back into place, I glared at my sleeping room, swiftly standing up and roughly pulling out the laptop. It booted up quickly and I sent the urgent e-mail to Jeff, telling him that the nagas would need extraction before the end of the week. Sending detailed information about where the nagas were being housed, I attached a screenshot of an empty looking field that was near the park he had suggested. I was able to get a good look at it when I was brought back this morning, not finding any kind of lighting pointed at the large field. It should be big enough for a pick-up in the chosen helicopter.

Setting the laptop next to me, I pulled my knees up and buried my face as I took deep breaths to calm down. If I entered the enclosures in my fearful state, then it probably wouldn't end very well. The fear quickly turned into anger before slowly subsiding, my breathing mellowing out as the emotional thoughts faded into nothingness.

Oso had killed the four humans that were trying to free them with force. That fact wouldn't change no matter how much I wanted it to. Four people were dead, and the news wasn't talking about it. Calmine had intervened somehow and I couldn't shake the feeling that

I

was going to be under scrutiny for it.

Shakily standing up from the bed, I moved out of the room towards the prep table and began to prepare the food for the nagas, taking my time and letting the meat warm up a little more. Since Sasha had already cut up the chunks into an appropriate size, I rubbed the usual nutritional powder over the pieces, allowing the heat of my hands to warm the meat up faster as I handled them. Ensuring the pieces were divided equally between the six

buckets, I mindlessly stared at the first bucket before lifting it off the table and bringing it into Oso's enclosure.

"Just...leave it by the door when you're done," I set it in the middle of the usual area, not bothering to look around for him. I didn't want to see those angry red eyes again...

I had tried to smile while dropping off food for the others but every time I looked at them, I could only see Oso's furious expression. It was like I had become numb to outside stimulus, just drifting through my chores as I went about my day. I could vaguely remember someone asking me if I was okay, but only mustered a hum as a response to whoever it was.

I blinked when I was forced to sit down in the familiar uncomfortable folding chair, unsure of how I came to be here. Glancing over both shoulders, I was once again flanked by the two men that always seemed to accompany Calmine.

"Ah've grown very tir'd of yawr antics, li'l Ms. (Y/n) (L/n)," Thick wisps of smoke flowed from the hefty man's lips, his girth slightly leaning back into the desk chair in front of me, "Ah've warned yah tah limit their exposure tah ya only tah feedin' an' cleanin' their cages."

"And I've told you that they need entertainment or else they'll go mad like any other creature," My mind snapped back to a previous conversation. While Oso had been right to be angry, I was still in charge of them and needed to keep them safe from the man sitting in front of me.

"Regardless," Calmine continued as if I hadn't spoken, "There's been some new developments tha' reached mah ears a few days ago. Something about a handful o' people trespassin' an' successfully gettin' intah the monsters' enclosures. It's mah understandin' tha' ya allowed one o' them tah get hurt before the matter was dealt wi'h."

"Hold on..." I paled as I followed his line of thought, "I didn't let anyone in! I don't even have the keycard that's needed to get past security!"

"Then why was this foun' in the back area o' the cages?" His pillowed hand pushed a plastic shape forward, the size barely larger than a credit card, "This is a forged keycard tha's only registered tah the employee gate, the reptile house, an' the security doors. Nah, do ya have any idea why tha' is?"

"It wasn't me!" I tried to stand up, but was pushed back down into the chair by the two men behind me, "Mr. Calmine, I had nothing to do with this! The only thing I knew of was that Oso had heard someone tell him that it was going to happen, but that's it! I don't have any kind of equipment to create a keycard like that."

"Then why does it have yawr signature?" Calmine frowned as he turned over a small stack of paperwork without breaking eye contact, watching me look down towards it, "This was created two weeks ago, under yawr name an' signature."

"

I didn't make it!

" My eyes snapped up to his, "Why can't you understand that? You have me under such a tight leash that you'd know about it the instant I tried something! You said so yourself that I don't have access to the other areas in the zoo."

Calmine leaned back in his chair once more, quietly studying my face as I spoke. It was a few moments before he said anything else.

"There's been a change'n plans," He took another drag from the cigar before rolling it between his fingertips, "Ah'm shippin' out the monsters next week an' ya won't be comin' with durin' the transit."

My heart dropped to the floor, "Wha--I'm the only one that can keep them in check! You

have

to bring me with them!"

"Naw anymore. They're bein' sold to a private collector, and the contract never included ya," Calmine picked up the keycard and slid it into a folder before tapping the cigar over an ashtray, "He's already got a large collection o' animals wi'h a crew able tah take care of them. Yaw're not needed."

"But-"

"Ah expect you tah prepare the monsters for transport'n seven days," Calmine stood up with finality, not letting me get in a word edgewise, "Ah also expect their cuts tah heal fully by tha' time."

I narrowed my eyes and glared at him as he walked by me, the pungent-smelling smoke trailing after him as he went. When Calmine left the office, I was pulled up by the two bodyguards and escorted down to the area that I had called home for the past few months. They did nothing more than push me into the back area, letting the double doors close behind me as I shifted my glare back to them.

Seven days...one week.

'You've got until the end of the week,'

Oso's snarl flashed in my mind as his words echoed in my ears. I snapped my focus towards his enclosure, the fear of him that resided in my gut vanishing with each step I took towards Oso's door.

He had known...

but how?!

My hand lay on the lever as my mind tried to figure out what to do, the familiar itch emerging along my jaw. Closing my eyes and resolving my will, I wrenched the lever down and pulled the door open.

"Oso!" I shouted into the enclosure, finding the red-haired naga quietly sitting underneath the heat lamp with his tail looped around in loose coils, his arms crossed over a girthy part to form a pillow for his head. Oso didn't

even move until I stood right in front of him, his eyes trailing up my body until our eyes met.

"...what."

"How did you know?"

"...know about what," Without breaking eye contact, Oso rested his chin against a propped up arm.

"You know

damn

well what I'm talking about!"

"Hmm..." A coy smirk crossed his lips as his eyelids lowered a little more, "You're gonna need to be more specific, (y/n)."

"Stop that," I narrowed my eyes down at him, "Don't get smart with me. You

knew

that something was going to happen in a week, so why couldn't you just tell me outright?"

"Because I like confusing you, and seeing you scared stiff of me was a nice change of pace," Oso stretched his arms while letting out a yawn, "We've already talked about this. You're my source of fun, and I said that I'd probably be more forward with you when we're out of here."

"You...were having fun with me?" I could feel my left eye twitch a little in annoyance, "Making me fall down, yelling at me about how horrible humans are, and ensuring that I'm terrified of you is what you consider '

fun

'?!"

"You're literally the only person I see on a regular basis," Oso tilted his head to the side a little, "I can't exactly have fun with my brothers, so that just leaves you."

"Telling me that you've killed people or that I'm stupid isn't what I consider 'fun', Oso--" I clenched my teeth tightly.

"That one was the truth, actually," The naga cut me off, "I wasn't lying about killing those people."

"Then where are...the bodies?" I warily asked, not sure if I wanted to know the answer.

"(Y/n)...look at me," Oso held his arms out wide, as if showing off his body, "I'm bigger than you, and you've probably never seen any of us open our mouths all the way."

"Okay...so you swallowed them whole..." I shook my head to get rid of the image my mind was trying to create, "Too much has happened today..."

"Sorry, (y/n)..." The softer tone of his voice drew my attention back to him, seeing him lower himself to the ground and rest his head upon his arms once more as a sullen look fell over his face, "I haven't felt like myself for a while, and I realize I took it too far earlier. I shouldn't have let myself get that enraged, especially when you had nothing to do with it..."

My expression became tender as I sat down in front of him, reaching out a hand to gently rest it on his head, "You have my attention now, Oso...I'm doing my best to get you all out of here. I've already contacted the person willing to fly you out, so I just need to find a way to free you all."

"You're not coming with?" Oso rocked his head into the palm of my hand, looking up while pushing himself a little closer to me. The expression on his face caught me by surprise, a genuine concern in his eyes as he questioned my absence from their escape. I swallowed the sudden lump in my throat.

"I...don't think I should."

"Why not?"

"I've been nothing but an obstacle to you all, and you're here because of my stupidity," I didn't flinch as Oso gently took my hand, raising his own towards the eyepatch over my right eye. Closing my right eye before he could lift the patch up, I watched him carefully with my working left eye, "Whatever happened to me is because I deserved it, and the last thing I'll be able to do is to get you back home. I figured you wouldn't want to see me anymore, so I won't be joining--"

"What can I do to convince you to come with us?" Oso's thumb gently pulled up the right eyelid, his own pupils widening as he took in the sight of the damaged iris, "What can we do to repay everything you've done for us?"

"Give me until tomorrow...I've got a lot to think about," I pulled away and replaced the eyepatch, removing myself from a coil I didn't notice that had curled up behind me, "I don't want anything to be repaid...I just want to make things right."

Oso simply hummed in acknowledgement as I left, staring at his hands when I closed the door.

Chapter 24

I completed the daily chores before closing Jyushi's enclosure door behind me, the lights dimming as it sealed shut. I simply stood there as I felt two arms wrap around my shoulders, a broad chest pressing against my back. A light rumble rolled through the chest before travelling upwards into the throat resting over my left shoulder.

"Do I have your attention now?" A cold cheek pressed into mine, the arms shifting higher to rest over my shoulders.

"Yeah, Jyushi...you have it," I spoke in a soft sigh, rubbing a free hand over my face before glancing over at the reticulated naga partially hidden in the dark.

"Good!" The sudden happy change in tone let me know that he was smiling. Jyushi released his hold on me as he trailed his hands down to mine, "I didn't know if you were going to be okay sleeping on a branch or not, so I made a place to sleep on the ground instead."

"I wouldn't mind either one, honestly," I started walking to wherever Jyushi was leading me to, my left eye slowly adjusting to the darkness of his enclosure. He led me around the larger parts of the water feature in his enclosure, carrying me over when we needed to cross, and pulled aside one of the larger bush branches to reveal a small space that was piled up with softer substrate. A sizable dent was pushed into the middle of the pile and Jyushi hung back with his hands pressed together nervously, "You didn't have to make this for me, Jyushi."

"Well...I don't know how humans sleep, so I thought the ground would be safer for you. No threat of falling off a branch..."

"You're right," A laugh fell from my lips, "We're not very skilled at staying in trees without some kind of external assistance."

Jyushi leaned in close, his orange eyes wide in the darkness, "I can help you stay in a tree while you sleep. I've never fallen off, and I'm really strong!"

I ran a hand through my hair on the back of my head, a hum of consideration sounding from my throat as I weighed my options. Considering I've had a collective eight hours of sleep over the last three days because I couldn't stop worrying about the nagas while I was in the hospital, I just really wanted some comfort...and Jyushi always came to mind when I wanted it.

"As long as our little rule stands while I sleep, then I wouldn't mind sleeping in a tree."

"The one where we can't explore without permission? That's okay!" His arms reached around my torso and I felt my feet leave the ground, hearing him laugh a little as I was hoisted up onto one of the larger branches in his enclosure. Ensuring that I was sitting securely on it, Jyushi let go temporarily and I heard the sound of his scales rubbing against the plaster of the 'bark', "Do humans do anything special before they fall asleep?"

"It depends on the person, really. I don't have any kind of ritual or habit, but some humans read some books, listen to music, or even watch something relaxing," My left eye caught some motion next to me before Jyushi reached out his hand to mine, gently taking it and pulling me onto a thick pile of coils. His hand trailed up my arm and rested on the back of my right shoulder as his other arm wrapped around my mid-back, firmly pressing my chest into his own. I pulled my arms up close to my chest, tucking a hand underneath my chin to act as a semi-firm cushion between his scales and my face, "What about you, Jyushi? Do you have anything that you do before you go to sleep?"

"I used to count the stars in the sky," A light laugh echoed within his chest, "I can't wait to see them again, seeing the different colored dots in the dark expanse! But now, I count how many clicks I hear in the room."

Jyushi's arms loosened a little before a hand slipped underneath the back of my shirt, his cold skin pressed against the dip in the skin where my spine was. In the silence of the conversation, I started to hear the clicks that he

was talking about, recognizing it as the heating system going through its timed program to keep the enclosures warm enough. Jyushi's tail shifted underneath me, a small part sliding over my legs and resting over the back of my knees.

"Jyushi...?" I looked up towards Jyushi's face.

"Hmm?" He tilted his head down in response, meeting the stare of my left eye.

"Promise you won't let me fall."

"Of course I won't," Jyushi's lips pulled apart in a wide smile before lowering his head and rubbing his cheek against mine, "Never ever."

The heating system clicked onto full power, jarring me awake as Jyushi quickly reacted to my body jumping a little, tightening his grip for a moment until he was sure that I wouldn't fall off.

"Good morning, Jyushi," I yawned, barely covering my mouth with a hand before I felt prodding fingers pull at my lips, "Ah...!"

"Sorry...!" Jyushi instantly retracted his curious digits, pulling his hands away from my face as an apologetic look washed over his, "I just never seen you open your mouth that wide before..."

"You haven't?" I raised an eyebrow, "I've yawned plenty of times before...Here."

I opened my mouth once more, hearing his curious hums as his index fingers gently pushed up my upper lip, revealing more of my teeth. Jyushi cautiously pressed a finger against each exposed tooth, feeling the front and the back before pressing the tip of his finger against the point.

"Why aren't your teeth sharp?" He pulled his hands away so I could speak, but the curious focus never left his eyes.

"They don't need to be. Humans don't need to grab onto their food since everything we eat is already dead," I ran a tongue over the teeth he touched, making a mental note to wash out my mouth more than normal.

"Why doesn't your tongue act like mine?"

"Humans don't need to pick up scents like snakes or nagas do. Our nose is pretty sensitive for our species, but it's balanced between our other four senses," His fingers pushed against my upper lip again and I let him explore what he wanted.

"It's so weird..." Jyushi's fingers plied at my tongue, pulling it out as far as I let it go before moving it around, "The tongue isn't even split or hidden away. How do you avoid swallowing it when you eat?"

"It presshesh down into the bottom of my jaw when I shwallow, but I shtill bite it shometimehs when I'm not paying attention," I spoke as clearly as I could with his fingers still in my mouth. Jyushi leaned closer still before pulling his exploring fingers away and looked down to the ground, "Jyushi?"

"Did you want to get down now?"

"I...probably should. I've got a pretty important topic to think about, and some heavier chores to do," I sighed as I sat up, adjusting the clothes that shifted in my sleep.

"Okay," Jyushi gave a wide smile before helping me down to the ground, lowering the rest of his body afterwards, "Will you be coming back today?"

"Of course! I try to visit you all every day," I returned his smile as I looked up to him, "Would you mind...if I slept another night with you?"

Jyushi's smile dropped as a shocked expression rested over his face before the smile returned much wider than before, his eyes gleaming with happiness, "Of course I wouldn't!"

Waving a farewell to Jyushi, I stripped down and stepped into the shower to give myself a good wash. Knowing that regular snakes had salmonella dwelling on their scales, I definitely didn't want to find out if that was still true for the nagas. Brushing my teeth for an extra minute and using mouthwash twice, I finally let myself dry off and get ready for the day.

Taking a deep breath, I started working on my smaller chores such as sweeping up the back area, washing off the dishes from yesterday that I never got to, or checking the e-mail account for new messages. I didn't see anything new from Jeff, so I could only guess that he was out of the office yesterday.

When every chore that I gave myself was finished, I turned my thoughts towards the discussion I had with Choro, Kara, and Oso.

I hadn't given much thought towards liking them further than what we already had established, but it was very clear by their behavior that they had. Choro was being respectful about it, Kara...it was clear what he was thinking but he never mentioned it outright, and Oso...

I sighed as I ran a hand through my loose hair.

Oso was losing himself in that cage, and I'm sure that the others would soon follow. While I was a little appreciative of his honesty about what happened four days ago, I couldn't shake the feeling that he wasn't telling me the whole story about what really went on when I was unconscious.

A closer relationship with the nagas...that's what they were asking for.

Karl's sneering face flashed in my head before I slammed my fist against the prep table, vehemently wishing for that taunting memory to never surface again.

I gritted my teeth as I walked towards Jyushi's door, opening it wide before moving down the line, not caring if the zoo was already open at this point. There was a discussion that needed to be had with the nagas, and I didn't care about the people wanting to see them for show.

Pulling open Choro's door, I moved back towards the prep table to where I could see the nagas cautiously looking out into the back room, the three venomous nagas moving out a little further into the area. The move seemed to encourage the others to come out of their enclosures. I let them look around the room and towards each other, waiting for them to look at me before I even started the conversation.

"I won't keep this long, as I know this area is much colder than your rooms," I crossed my arms over my chest as I leaned against the prep table, the metal lip pressing into my butt as I shifted my weight, "I don't know if you've all been caught up, but there was an incident about four days ago that involved the older three brothers."

I watched as Choro's, Kara's, and Oso's face shifted into slight suspicion while the other three appeared curious.

"There was something brought to my attention and I've given it a lot of thought throughout the last few days. This led to the realization that...you all may have been feeling this without me knowing about it. I just want to confirm something," I lowered my arms, pressing the palms into the lip of the table as I looked at each naga, "I need to know if you all feel respect or affection towards me."

"Affection," The older three answered in near unison, each of their voices calm and certain.

"Eh...affection, I guess," Todo rested his chin against a hand, his arms propping themselves up against his waist, "I appreciate what you do for me, but...you could use a little attitude adjustment sometimes."

"Affection!" Jyushi cried out, his body shuddering as excitement tore through his system. He was obviously holding himself back from rushing towards me, to which I gave a soft smile, "Affection, affection, affection!"

My eyes shifted towards the lavender naga, seeing him pull back a little as uncertainty covered his face. I recognized the posture and let him answer in his own time, waiting in silence as he tried to put the words together in his mind.

"Respect...and some affection," Ichi finally commented quietly.

"Then it's settled," I pushed myself off from the prep table and planted my hands on my hips, "We all share the same feelings towards each other."

"Does that mean...?" Choro timidly called out, his hands lifting a little in shock.

"I feel both respect and affection towards all of you, even when I don't really show it," Glancing over at Todo, I saw him stick out his tongue briefly, "I've never been with a naga before, so let's keep this simple. If I do something that doesn't feel good to you, let me know. I'll let you all know if you hurt me or if something doesn't feel right."

"Are you sure you're able to handle us?" Oso tilted up his head a little, the coy smirk firmly on his lips once more.

"I don't know, but...I'd be lying if I said I wasn't excited to find out," A blush spread across my face as I let out a small laugh, "One ground rule, though! If either party says 'no' or 'stop', then the other partner immediately stops what they're doing."

"But of course!" Kara exclaimed, one of his hands brushing aside his bangs while the other rested on his hip, "It wouldn't be right for an act to be forced upon them."

Oso looked over towards his brothers, glancing back at Choro every so often before Jyushi moved a little forward, his happiness curbed by something they were 'talking' about. I looked at their faces closely, watching their tongues flick in and out of their mouths rapidly as eye contact shifted between the brothers. It was fascinating to watch, my hand absentmindedly rubbing against the side of my jaw once more.

"Yes!" Jyushi shouted out loud and rushed towards me before picking me up in his arms, "You can still sleep with me tonight!"

"Okay!" I tried to not sound surprised, the explosion of activity coming out of nowhere after the silence exchange.

"(Y/n), just keep an eye out for that ride," Oso called out as he turned back towards his room, "Let us know of any changes."

The serious tone of his voice caught my attention and I gave him a solemn nod before he disappeared into the jungle of his room.

Chapter 25

The doors to the enclosures were never locked again.

While they remained closed for appearances' sake, I never touched the locking mechanisms to keep the nagas inside. I didn't want them to be trapped in their own rooms should something beyond my control happen again.

As the clock ticked past the zoo's closing time, I finished drying the last feed bucket and setting it with the rest in its assigned cabinet. Wiping off my hands, I moved towards the room with my bed and pulled out the laptop, silently wishing that Jeff responded.

'(Y/n),

I can have the crew there by Friday night. There's an air show this weekend that the Mil Mi-26TS can use as a cover for being in the area and I've hired a vet to ride along with the crew. She's a reptile specialist and a trusted family friend of mine. If the nagas are hurt or sick in any way, she'll be able to handle it during the flight.

Concerning the trip itself, the route we'd need to take would have us stop in Hawaii for a refueling before heading towards the naga island. It'll be a little bumpy, but that shouldn't be much of a problem as long as the weather cooperates with us. The vet is equipped to administer tranquilizers to help the nagas calm down during rough patches if they're not able to stay calm on their own.

The helicopter should be in your area around 8 p.m. on Friday, and will be ready for immediate departure when they touch down.

Jeff'

I read the e-mail multiple times over, my heart racing as the reality of the situation crashed over me like a wave.

Friday night...three nights from now.

I had two days to find a way to escape the San Diego Zoo with six nagas, preferably undetected, and get them across two busy roads into the field where the helicopter was going to touch down. Two days to stay under Calmine's radar and hope that his plan didn't move up in its schedule.

Responding to the e-mail with sincere gratitude, I quickly started to look through the pictures on the internet for detailed photos of the reptile house that we were currently in, finding the layout for the exterior exhibits and interior enclosures. Nothing really told me that we were underground except the elevator ride yesterday, letting me know that I was locked in here with no easy way out.

The elevator wasn't large enough to carry all six nagas plus myself at once, so that left the double doors by the security office. They were locked with an electronic keypad, but maybe there was a way to bypass that...which meant that I had to get friendly with the security officer if I wanted to use that exit.

Gently closing the laptop and sliding it back into its hiding place, I grabbed a garbage bag from the kitchen area and the cleaning rake, opening up Oso's enclosure with some difficulty. Stepping over the lip of the enclosure, I leaned the rake against the wall before snapping the plastic bag open.

"(Y/n)?" Oso called out in a slightly raised voice, "You've already cleaned up today..."

"I'm giving myself an excuse to try and find a way out of here," I coughed a little as the stale smell of plastic hit my throat, "I've got two days."

"Two days...then that means we're leaving Friday?" He came fully into view, his hair still a little wet from the bathing I must've disrupted. I glanced down towards his chest and scales, still seeing the faint damage on his scales and disappearing scabs on his skin.

"Friday night, to be exact. The helicopter will be landing nearby since they can't pick us up from here directly, so I need to find a way to get you all out

there," I began raking through the substrate, finding artificial leaves that had been pulled from their branches and thrown to the ground, "How are you doing on your venom?"

"Ah," He placed a hand over his neck, "It's all right, I guess. Not full, if that's what you're asking."

"As long as you have some to defend yourself with, that's all that matters to me," Lifting the fake leaves into the garbage bag, I looked back towards Oso, "I'm not going to hold you to that promise anymore, okay?"

He simply raised an eyebrow as an answer.

"I thought it would've been better for me if you didn't cause problems here...but considering what's happened and what we're about to do, I can't let my worry hold you back from being safe."

"(Y/n)--"

"I'm being serious, Oso," I dropped more leaves into the bag that were scattered throughout the area, "I wanted to keep everything low-key here, to not draw attention to what I was trying to do...and I almost lost Ichi because of it."

"This and that are two different things," Oso's hands covered my own, forcing me to drop the rake and make me pay attention to him, "You've got a plan now, so act on it. Don't let this become a weight for you to shoulder alone. You wanna repay your debt to me, right?"

"Yeah...?"

"Then make it happen," A smile spread his lips wide, "You're a smart woman, (y/n)."

He let my hands go before moving back a little, allowing me to pick up the rake once more.

"Oso," I caught his attention as he turned away, making eye contact with him as the red-haired naga looked back, "You're not messing with me again,

are you?"

"Maybe," His tongue flicked out as his eyes closed with a smile. I lightly scoffed as a small smile rested on my own lips, partially happy to see the Oso I had grown to know come back just a little bit after the violent outburst yesterday.

With the half-full garbage bag in my hands, I put the rake away and closed Oso's door, turning towards the double door hallway with the intention of getting past them. The white walls were bright compared to the dark colors of the back area, my left eye hurting a little as it adjusted to the brighter lighting while my right eye was safely covered by the eyepatch. The security booth soon came into view as the hallway walls gave way to a small area where equipment could be set up for something.

The large glass windows were coated with some kind of special sheeting that didn't allow outside viewing, seeing my reflection in the windows mimic my movements as I raised a hand to knock on the window closest to the door. Tapping on the glass twice, I could see some movement inside the booth but not make out any of the details while I pointed towards the double doors.

"I don't have my keycard yet, but I need to drop this off to the garbage area."

There was a short period of silence before I heard an intercom click live.

"

Just leave the bag there for the sanitation staff to pick up later,

" A male voice sounded from the small speaker underneath the window.

"My boss said that I had permission to leave for this kind of stuff now. Something about an expanded contract that dealt with a new janitorial role," I lightly shrugged my shoulders.

"

Unless you're given a keycard, I can't let you through.

"

"Just for this once? If you need to keep an eye on me, then you can escort me in. It's literally just one bag."

"

Orders are orders. Just leave it there and I'll radio for someone to pick it up.

"

"All right," I gave a smile to where I thought the officer was standing before setting the garbage bag down, "Thanks."

Turning away and walking back down the hall, my smile faded into a frown. I had a feeling that I wouldn't be able to persuade my way through, which meant that I needed to force my way. I never paid attention to the security's schedule since there wasn't an immediate need for me to get beyond those doors, but I'd try again later on after most of the zoo staff had left. Maybe there was a shift change that I could take advantage of.

"Well?"

I closed my eyes in frustration before opening them to see the youngest naga, his tail pressing my waist against the back wall as an expectant look settled on his face. I rested my hands on the warm scales, trying to push him off of me as I took in a breath.

"I'm sorry for being distant yesterday," I apologized to Todo, "I shouldn't have let what I was going through distract me from giving you some attention."

He had claimed that while I was in a haze, I stepped on his tail and ignored him the entire time I was in his enclosure. Since I couldn't really remember

what happened, I was in no position to argue if he was telling the truth or not.

Todo lowered his tail with a huff, crossing his arms over his chest with some kind of finality, "As long as you know your place, human."

"I would like some ounce of respect, Todo...getting called by my species name doesn't really help me feel very welcome by you," I moved away from the wall, moving over towards the water feature installed in his enclosure and kneeling next to it for an inspection. While I was trying to break them out, I couldn't let my normal activities suffer from it and tip Calmine off on what I was trying to do.

"And how should I go about showing you respect?" I heard Todo huff as he came up beside me, leaning down towards the water as I reached in to clear off the drain that had become clogged by substrate debris.

"Calling me by my actual name would be a good start," I grunted as I scooped out a small handful of debris before reaching back in for more, "Instead of 'human'."

"Hmm," Todo's arm perched on top of my back, leaning some of his weight against me and forcing me to stay in a bent over position, "Your name doesn't sound as satisfying as 'human' does, though."

"Todo...get off, please...!" I gritted between my teeth as my poor positioning was starting to give way as he leaned further onto me.

"Oh, you're not afraid to get wet, are you...?" His voice took on a teasing tone.

Swallowing what little saliva there was in my mouth, I looked up to Todo from over my shoulder, meeting his smug look with a small plea written on my face, "Please...let me up..."

"Hmm...no," With a sharp shove, Todo pulled back as I tumbled forward into the shallow pond, the warm water splashing everywhere as I tried to quickly climb out of it. A sharp sting lanced through my arm and I quickly

pressed it against my chest, fearing that I had cut myself on one of the rocks and not wanting to bleed in Todo's enclosure. The naga laughed a little as I crawled onto the shore, standing to my full height and making my way towards the employee door with my injured arm tightly pressed against my chest.

The cut began to throb more as I pushed the door open.

"(Y/n)...?" Todo's laughter had subsided as I looked over my shoulder towards him, not wanting to show off the red stain spreading across my wet shirt. The laughter and playfulness had completely died from his face, replaced with a small look of concern.

"I'll be back to finish the job," I gave him a reassuring smile before closing the door and pulling my trembling arm from the shirt. The cut was nastier than I thought it was, the gash starting near my wrist and ending close to my elbow. Thankfully, it was shallow enough to not have pierced the artery. I glanced towards the double doors, staggering towards it.

If this injury wasn't going to get me through to see the layout of the reptile house, then I wasn't sure what would.

"I need some medical attention," I called out as I walked towards the security booth, pressing my arm against my chest and fully revealing the seeping blood stain spreading across the fabric, "It's not as bad as it looks, but I still need help."

"

A paramedic is on the way,

" A different voice called out, drawing my attention to the change of officers. The current one was female, and she would probably be working well into the night for her shift.

The double doors buzzed open and a medical officer stepped through the doors, quickly taking a look at my arm and unzipping the large duffel bag marked as 'First Aid'. Pulling out a large roll of gauze, ointment, and

something else I didn't recognize, the medic quickly started to work on my arm. Numbing the pain with the unknown cream, he smeared some ointment on and wrapped the entire roll around my forearm, using thicker pads to cover the cut from the gauze.

"Was this from a fall?"

"Yeah, I lost my footing in one of the enclosures and fell against the rocks in the water feature. I'll be removing it since it's too dangerous to leave in the enclosure," I hissed a little through my teeth as the cut started to throb again, "Am I able to grab some tools for that?"

"Yeah, I'll walk you there," He helped me stand back up and swiped his keycard for access to the doors. I took in every bit of detail that I could as I was led down towards the end of the hallway, taking a right while observing the fire escape signs pointing towards the left. Glancing behind me, I saw another sign down the hall with an arrow aiming to the left once more.

The medic pushed open a sturdy door that revealed a large utility room that was stocked with a few tools and a lot of spare materials used in the various enclosures within the building. I grabbed a thick pair of gloves, mentioning to the medic that I'll leave the pair and the sharp rock by the security booth when I was done. Turning out of the utility room, I watched the medic walk away as he reached for the radio attachment hanging off of his shoulder, waiting for him to turn away from the hall before making my way towards the fire escape. Veering around the two corners, I saw the emergency exit door with a sign that stated an alarm would sound when the door lever was depressed.

"Lovely..." I quickly turned back towards the nagas' enclosures and made my way through the locked double doors, waving the pair of gloves towards the officer to signal that I had borrowed equipment. Opening the door to Todo's enclosure once more, I pulled one of the gloves onto my uninjured arm and walked towards the soaking pond.

"Your arm...!" I heard Todo to my right, looking over until I could see him with my uncovered eye. He didn't look hysterical, but the remorse was obvious on his face.

"It looks worse than it appears," I knelt by the water one more time, "Just don't push me in this time. I'm grabbing something."

"What are you grabbing?" He sounded closer.

"The key that will get you all out of here."

Chapter 26

"...and how will a rock help us escape?" Jyushi asked as his fingers ran through my hair, gently pushing through the knots before letting the loose strands fall through his digits and repeating the process all over.

"The rock itself won't help," I rested my injured arm against the thick length of tail that cradled my right side, gazing up at the black ceiling as the lights within the enclosure turned off, "It's a way for me to get the thing we need to escape."

"Okay," His scales shifted slightly as a length of tail slipped over my legs, the darkness of the room leaving me mostly blind to his movements, "(Y/n)...?"

"Yes?" I felt his fingers stop their meticulous movement in my hair, making me look up to where I thought he was.

"Why do you keep getting hurt when you're around us?" Jyushi's hand lightly grazed the top of my injured arm, his fingers barely pressing into the gauze wrap.

"Humans are easily hurt," I gave a soft sigh, "We don't have thick skin like you or your brothers, and we definitely don't have scales that keep us safe from the smaller threats. Our bodies are easy to hurt, but they heal relatively quickly. This should be gone in a few days."

The dark room masked his movements and I bit down a surprised cry when I felt the eyepatch slide off my head. He lightly touched a thumb over the eyelid, moving the digit gently towards my cheek as if wiping off a tear.

"...and this?"

"Another two weeks or so," I could barely see his concerned face in the dark, "Jyushi, what's wrong?"

"I told you that I was strong...but you keep getting hurt. Am I not strong enough to protect you?"

"Jyushi," I quickly sat up and moved to face him, straddling his tail as it shifted to accommodate my movement, "Of course you're strong. Just because I was hurt when you weren't around doesn't make you weak; it just means that I wasn't strong enough to keep myself safe."

"Then why do I feel sad whenever I look at your injuries?" The dip in Jyushi's voice struck a chord in my heart, making me move even closer and reach out to him, fumbling around in the dark until his head was cradled between my arms and chest.

I didn't speak for a while, not knowing what the right words to say were.

"You...feel sad because someone you love was hurt..." I put my own emotions into words, "When I saw how hurt you and your brothers were in those awful cargo containers, I knew that it was all my fault. I couldn't do anything to help you..."

Jyushi's arms slowly wrapped around my waist, his hands pressing into my back, "(Y/n), I don't want to see you hurt anymore."

"Are you able to hold out for another two days?" I ran a hand through his soft hair, "When Friday night comes, you can do what you want to keep me safe...but until then, let me keep you safe however I'm able."

"No..." He shook his head in my arms, "...you've already done so much for my brothers and I--"

"When we're back on your island, you can keep me safe from things that could harm me," I loosened my hold, pulling away a little to see his face more clearly, "But since we're on my terrain, I'm keeping you safe."

"...okay..." Jyushi's face melted from concern to resignation, tilting his head forward until it rested against my right shoulder, "Just promise to not get more hurt."

"I promise," I ran my fingers through his hair once more, keeping quiet on how I wasn't sure how I'd stay out of physical danger when we were about to head into the most dangerous situation I've ever been in. If this escape went wrong, then all of our lives would be at risk.

The nagas would be killed without mercy, and I'd be lucky if I died alongside them.

The day started like the one previously, with Jyushi keeping me still when my body remembered that I had fallen asleep almost ten feet off of the ground. I stifled my yawns and adjusted my clothing, realizing that Jyushi was watching my movements with rapt attention.

I found that Jyushi had provided a more comfortable sleeping surface than the bed I was given, not sure if it was because he moved his coils to fit my body or if it was his constant presence that allowed me to completely rest, knowing that he'd be watching to make sure that I didn't fall.

After the refreshing morning shower, I started working on the other enclosures that I hadn't cleaned yesterday. During the chore, I glanced towards the cameras within the enclosures to see what areas it was pointed towards. The equipment was more focused on the viewing window that separated the audience from the naga, and I had noticed that the nagas were keeping to the back wall more often. I wasn't sure if it was coincidental or not, but it worked out in my favor.

If the nagas were already hiding from the cameras, then it wouldn't be an odd change in habit when I told them what my plan would be for Friday night.

The doors to their enclosures would be unlocked like I've been leaving them recently, allowing the nagas to leave by themselves. I would be grabbing our escape key tomorrow night when I returned the gloves I borrowed, along with the sharp rock, 'forgetting' to return the keycard that I knew most security services gave to those that needed one for a short period of time. The only problem was convincing the officer that I needed it.

If I was able to get it, then it's a simple matter of using the key to get past the double doors, somehow knock out the officer, and let the nagas through. From there, we'd use the emergency exit and escape by climbing over the property line wall of the zoo.

I had used some time to memorize the layout of the map of the San Diego Zoo before going into Jyushi's enclosure last night. The reptile house was about a thousand feet away from the main street as the crow flies, so we'd have a small trek in order to cover as much ground in a short amount of time. The second street was just as far from the first, but the length of terrain between the two streets was dirt and underbrush that continued on the other side of the second street. From there, it would just be a matter of finding the massive helicopter in the empty fields.

Once the nagas were in the darkness, I wasn't going to be worried about them being seen.

Just over sixty hours before the helicopter landed and we could start the escape.

"...were you...serious about what you said yesterday?" Choro asked as he sprawled out behind me, the bright green coils pressed against the ground in thick loops as the last foot or so of his tail gently curled around my left ankle. I was kneeling on the ground, reaching into his soaking 'river' and clearing away the debris from the overspill drain. Glancing behind me, I met his dark green eyes with a sure smile.

"Of course I was. You were all being honest with me, so I needed to be honest with you," Returning my focus to the task at hand, I felt his tail tighten a little before relaxing. A light frown pressed down on my lips as the memories of him and Todo pushing me into the water replayed in my mind.

He must not want to repeat the incident...

"I'm...happy that you were honest," Choro gave a soft sigh, "I was really worried that I'd been too forward a few days ago, and that I completely

ruined what you thought of me."

"You mean when you asked to kiss me?" I lifted myself into a proper kneeling position, tossing aside the handful of substrate that managed to lodge itself in the drain. Moving myself over so I could look at him with my left eye, I raised an eyebrow a little, "Like I had said, you asked a question before you did anything and I really respected that. It showed me that you cared enough to listen to what I had to say, and enough awareness to ask in the first place."

"Is it wrong that I still...want that?" He gently lifted himself up with his hands, his eyes no longer meeting mine. I glanced over towards the blackened window, knowing there were people on the other side.

"I don't think it's wrong, Choro," I leaned back towards the overspill drain, gathering the remaining blockage and scooping it all into a wad before standing up with it, "Just let me finish the rest of my chores for the day and I'll be back when I've got some time to myself, okay?"

His pointed smile returned when I finished speaking, raising to his full height and releasing my ankle so I could move without pulling on him.

Quickly dumping the debris into the garbage outside the enclosure, I pressed a hand against my chest and felt my heart race, fluttering against my ribcage as I took deep breaths to calm down. My mind never stopped thinking about what would happen if I entered a deeper relationship with any of the nagas ever since I grew closer to Jyushi on the island, but I had to force those darker thoughts down as the nagas safety became my main concern. Now that we were so close to escaping, those sinful thoughts were coming back with a vengeance. I knew it was wrong for me to think about that kind of stuff when they still weren't free, but I'd be lying to myself if I said I never had a fantasy like this before. Their confession just added fuel to the fire...

Fuck...

Just five more hours until the zoo closed...

and then I could have all the fun I wanted

, my inner voice finished the thought before I shook my head.

No...Two more nights. I just needed to get past these two more nights...well, four nights with the helicopter ride...

Clenching my fist tightly, the pain of my nails digging into my skin struck the dark thoughts from my head and I was able to focus on each chore without disruption.

"Kara, I need you to move," I gently tapped the side of his tail with the rake, seeing him curl into a tighter ball on the ground, "Hey...are you doing okay?"

"I don't feel right..." His usually strong voice was muffled by his own body, smothered by the coils hiding his torso from view, "I feel like I need to be mad at you, but I don't know why."

I lay the rake flat on the ground and knelt next to the pile of teal-blue scales, gently placing a hand on the section closest to me. The muscles underneath his scales jumped a little, not expecting the contact.

"Have I done something that made you angry recently?"

"No...? I'm not sure," The coils covering his torso loosened a little, letting him peek out of his safe ball to look at me, "It's weird. I feel happy whenever I see you, but recently...I get so angry when you enter the room that I don't know what to think about."

"I think I understand what you're talking about," My hand moved up a layer of coil, resting near his shoulder, "Is it a kind of annoyance? Something that in small amounts doesn't normally bug you, but when you start noticing it every day, it starts to get on your nerves."

"I think so?" As Kara pulled out of his ball, I noticed that the scales closest to his waist were starting to dull into an ugly grayish-teal color. I couldn't

help but stare at the ill-timed shed cycle, "It's more like...I don't want you around anyone else?"

"Oh, so you want me all to yourself?" My mind started to compare the different attitudes in Kara, making notes of what could be happening because of the shed or what could be the solitude getting to him.

"Yes...?" He groaned as he fully emerged from his ball, "Ugh, I don't know."

"Kara," I carefully placed a hand against his cheek, fully aware of the audience behind the black window, "I need you to listen to me carefully."

His copper eyes sharpened as they focused on my own hues.

"You may be going to shed soon, so I need you to soak more than you normally would on the island," I saw the question rise in his expression and responded in a hushed voice, "The reason being is that you won't have the luxury of soaking throughout the flight home. The flight there will be a tedious two-day journey before we even land on your island. If you soak day and night these next two days, there shouldn't be a problem on the flight...and there

can't

be a problem on the flight."

His eyes widened a little before his pupils narrowed as he nodded, "...okay."

I removed my hand from his cheek and placed it once more on the closest section of tail near me, "I'll spend what time I can with you, but please understand that I need to act like nothing is happening in two days."

"No, I get it," Kara fully uncoiled himself, gliding towards the shallow soaking pool as he looked back at me with a confident smile, "I'll make sure there won't be a problem, (y/n)."

Chapter 27

The last five hours slowed to a crawl, finding myself pacing around the back area as the minutes ticked by.

I had double checked the e-mail sent by Jeff, reconfirming the timetable that I was working with and ensuring that I was going to lead the nagas to the correct area. I had most of the aerial view of the map memorized, remembering some details of when I was brought back to the zoo from the hospital. I ran through imaginary situations in my head, coming up with problems that could possibly happen and figuring out how I would go about solving it before the nagas were discovered missing.

Another look at the clock told me that only two hours had passed since the last time I checked.

A deep groan rumbled through my throat, resigning to lay down on the bed and throwing an arm over my eyes in frustration. After a few quiet moments, I sat back up and walked towards Ichi's enclosure.

Pulling the door closed behind me, I sat on one of the 'logs' in his room before looking around. The substrate had been freshened up since I was in here last, probably something Sasha did during her volunteer time. The gentle splash of water could be heard throughout the room, much quieter than it was in the other enclosures.

"...are you just gonna sit there...?" Ichi's voice came from the back corner where the heating light was affixed.

"I was getting antsy on my own, so I decided to come in here," I responded before standing up and making my way towards the lavender corn naga, his head barely lifting up to watch me as I came closer, "If the other people need a reason for me being in here, then let them think I'm checking on the wound."

"You said that you wouldn't bother me about it ever again," His eyes partially narrowed, the irises growing thin.

"I'm not

actually

going to look at it, Ichi. I just...need to let out some pent-up energy."

"By talking to me...?"

"I don't know," I sat down heavily in front of him, my eyes following the line of his spine from his waist as it corded over itself multiple times before ending at the tip of his tail, "You're the only one I don't really know very much about, but I'd like to try and change that before this all happens."

"...my brothers put you up to this, didn't they?" Ichi sighed as he turned his torso to the side, ensuring that his back was facing me.

"No, they didn't. This is something that I've been meaning to do for a little while, but...events stopped me from doing so," I caught a glimpse of the knife wound in Ichi's side, satisfied to see that it wasn't getting worse.

"My name is Ichi and I'm a piece of trash. Fuck off."

"I will when I find out more about you," I laughed a little, "I already know your name, but didn't know that you were a piece of trash."

"

Are

...present-tense," His chest huffed as he gave a sigh.

"Sorry. I didn't know that you

are

a piece of trash," I corrected myself as my fingers began to play with the substrate by my crossed legs, "Well, my name is (y/n) and I take care of six nagas that I love. My favorite animals are cats and snakes, and I used to dream of opening a cat cafe before enrolling in college."

"Cats...?" Ichi slightly turned around to face me again, "You mean you

like

those big clawed beasts?"

"Big...? Oh! No, I meant the smaller ones. Housecats," I shook my head a little, "The big ones are cute, too, but I prefer not getting turned into mincemeat when I try to hug one."

"There are...smaller ones?"

"Of course! Humans bred the bigger cats until they thought they were small enough for people to have them safely in their homes. There are different colors and breeds now, but most housecats are small enough to fit in our laps," I used my hands to outline how big modern domesticated cats were, watching Ichi's eyes grow in fascination, "They still have claws and teeth, but they can't kill humans with a single swipe anymore."

"That's...so small."

"Yeah, they can be pretty small."

"Can I see one?" Ichi had fully turned around on his coils.

"Sure! I can show you when the people out there leave," I briefly motioned towards the black window, "I've got a piece of technology that'll let you watch whatever interests you, as long as you promise to not get it wet. I still need it while I'm here."

"...why? Is the technology allergic to water or something?" He raised an eyebrow in curiosity.

"You can say that," Giving a small nod, I thought about how to describe the laptop in terms he would understand, "Have you ever encountered a thunderstorm on the island? Complete with lighting, or bolts of light every so often?"

"Yeah, a few times."

"Well, when that light bolt hits a puddle of water, the water becomes charged with the energy from the hit and messes it up. It's similar to what happens with this tech. If too much water gets into its system, the little lightning bolts making it run become disrupted and it won't function anymore."

"I think I get it...though I'm not sure why humans would want something that runs on storms..."

"Like with most things, we found that it could be useful to us and figured out a way to harness it," I shrugged. It wasn't the cleanest explanation of electricity, but if Ichi understood that water would fry the laptop, then my point got across, "We're not the smartest creatures on the planet."

"Clearly..." Ichi's dark eyes shifted towards the black window, "What is it like out there?"

"Out...

there

?" I nodded towards the silently mentioned area before receiving a nod, "Well...I haven't been out there yet, but I suppose that it's a dark area-"

"Not where we are right now," He cut me off, "I meant the world outside of this cramped place."

"Ah...sorry," Lowering my eyes back to the substrate underneath me, I began picking through the various leaves and bark, "We're in a country called the United States of America, in a state called California and within a city named San Diego. It's right on the western coastline of America and

probably the best place for us to be during an escape, since we need to head west to get to your island."

My index finger began drawing out a rough map of the state, circling where we were on the south-westernmost part of the coast.

"There's a beautiful mountain range that you can see from here, but the city itself is like a metal jungle of taller buildings and wide roads that allow wheeled vehicles to drive down," I drew out a simple car and semi truck as I continued my explanation, "We'll be encountering two roads before I can get you to the safety of the helicopter."

"More small cages?"

"No," My answer was sharper than I intended it, softening my voice as I continued, "No...no more containers or chains. No more forced drugs that will make you sleep..."

"...and what about you?"

I flinched a little when Ichi's hand lifted up my chin for a brief moment, pulling away when he was sure that I was looking at him again.

"What

about

me?"

"Will you be in the helicopter, too?"

"I..." Turning away a little bit before holding his gaze once more, I firmed up my voice, "If you all want me there, then I will be."

Ichi looked like he wanted to speak before completely retracting, withdrawing from me physically and moving back to the heating lamp as I heard the familiar far-away chime of the closing announcement. I stood up with a glance towards Ichi, seeing his face shift in thought as he curled underneath the heat lamp.

"Let me grab the laptop and pull up some cat videos for you to watch," I offered him a soft smile as I pushed through the door, glancing at the rock resting on the prep table with the pair of gloves I borrowed on top of it. My eyes hardened a little bit before I continued to the room, unplugging the laptop and moving back towards Ichi's enclosure. As long as I took back the laptop before the zoo opened tomorrow, I shouldn't get in trouble for it.

With Ichi not really moving from the heat lamp, I set up the laptop as close as I could without it being directly under the heat source. I carefully walked him through how to use it and opened up the internet browser, showing him the various video sites that he was able to use, and bringing up a short video with different kittens and cats all interacting with each other.

The lavender corn naga was instantly enraptured by what he was seeing, coming closer and lightly touching the screen as the kittens tumbled about, pulling his fingers away when he realized that he couldn't actually touch the animals. I sat with him through a few videos, slightly leaning against his tail when Ichi shifted against me, his tail slowly curling up underneath him as he moved away from the heat lamp.

"I wish I could've had the chance to hold one or two..." Ichi quietly commented as he scrolled through the video media website, looking at the recommended videos.

"I'm sorry," I rested a hand against his scales, "If I was able to manage it without the people in charge freaking out about you eating them, then I would've tried sooner..."

"No, it's all right," He shook his head, "It would've just gotten you into more trouble."

"I know you can't eat the videos, so you're more than welcome to watch until you get tired," I moved to stand up, looking down at Ichi as he watched, "I'll just pick up the laptop in the morning when I wake up."

"Okay. I'll keep it away from the water."

Waving goodbye, I closed the door behind me and looked over to Choro's enclosure. Taking in a deep breath and fighting down the rising blush, I pulled open his door and walked into the humid 'jungle', keeping an eye out for his form in the branches above me. Standing on the edge of the 'river' bank, I rested my hands on my hips.

"Choro, I'm back," I called out into the near silence of the enclosure, hearing something shift near the heat lamp towards the back corner.

"You're back already?" Choro sounded tired. I frowned as the thought of waking him up crossed my mind.

"Yeah. Zoo's closed and I've got nothing else to do."

"Don't you usually sleep with Jyushi? Are you going to go back tonight?" He pushed through a large leaf that hid his form from prying eyes.

"I've slept with him the last two nights, yeah...but I've got a few other things to do before I can think about sleep at the moment," I relaxed my arms, "One of them is in regards to what you asked for earlier."

The statement seemed to wake him up, his dark green eyes widening a little before looking over to his left. A small tint of red began to color his cheeks.

"Ah, that...We don't have to do that if you don't want to," Choro's voice suddenly sounded unsure. I thought about the change in attitude for a moment before hitting on an idea.

"Choro...are you smelling Kara on me?"

"Yeah..." His eyes glanced towards me again, "It's a really upset scent."

"If the scent is worrying you, I can always go shower off and come back," I pointed towards the door with my thumb, "I can assure you that the scent has nothing to do with you. We were talking about him going into shed, and he's figuring out some new emotions in the meantime. He's not going to hurt you, I promise."

"No, you don't have to go," Choro finally made eye contact with me, coming a little closer as his lower half hit the water, "I just...wanted to make sure that it wasn't something that you weren't aware of."

"No, I'm fully aware of it," I watched carefully as he came closer to the shoreline I was standing on, the water washing over the back of his tail as it stretched out before curling up underneath him for stability, "Would you still like to kiss me?"

It sounded strange to ask someone that...the question brought me back to memories of middle school and how awkward it was for my first kiss. I translated the inner laughter into a smile.

"Yes," Choro leaned down a little from his position, lowering himself to my height, "I...just don't want to mess it up the second time."

"I doubt you will since we're not underwater like the first one. Just take in a deep breath, let it out, and follow my lead," I waited until his eyes focused back on me, leaning towards him as he mirrored my movement. Our lips touched for a brief moment, like two children not understanding what a kiss was, before Choro suddenly took the lead.

His hands shifted from his sides to my waist, holding me in place before I could pull away. His head tilted sideways a little and pried my lips open with his tongue, quickly raiding my mouth as the arms slid both higher on my back and lower on my waist. The feeling of the serpentine tongue playing with my human tongue was not what I was expecting, my hands quickly raising up to his shoulders and pushing back slightly to separate the kiss.

"Wait...hold on..." I gasped as Choro continued to hold me, his head dipping down to make sure that I was okay.

"Did I do it wrong?" He brought the hand from my back to my chin, keeping my head still for a moment as a worried look crossed his face.

"Not...not at all. I just wasn't expecting...what you gave me," I shook my head as he caressed my cheek. From the first kisses under the water to this,

there was a huge difference. The first ones were needy, in the heat of the moment...this one was full of affection and tenderness, but with a small edge of heat.

Passionate would be the better term.

"May...I give you another one?"

"...yes..."

Chapter 28

I had to stop myself before it went too far and assured him that I would be okay despite my heavy blushing and gasping while leaving Choro's enclosure after almost an hour of kissing. Closing the door behind me, I pressed my hands against my face, unsure if I felt shame for what I did with an innocent naga or not. Nothing I had shown Choro gave any inkling of what could happen beyond the kissing, but I caught myself multiple times thinking that I wanted more.

Five more days...

Five more days and I would be on their island alone.

I stilled as my hands fell down to my sides, a new thought worming its way through my head.

If I had them brought to the same island that they lived at before...then there was a chance that Calmine and his men would hunt them down again. The remote laboratory could still be in place.

Shoving myself off of the door, I quickly headed into the bathroom to strip down and wash off, stepping into the cold water and leaning against the wall for several minutes as I tried to think of another plan. The water cascaded down my warm skin, rinsing off the sweat and perspiration as I closed my eyes, creating a mental image of the water cleaning everything in my mind.

The best place was to start at the beginning...

...and the beginning was on that island.

Turning off the water and briefly drying my hair, I rushed to the bedroom to dress in loose-fitting clothes before turning my attention towards the six doors of the naga enclosures.

Was this something I needed to tell them? Probably.

Did I need to tell them this right now? Probably not...but it wouldn't do any good to just let the thought fester in my mind.

I quickly went down the line, pulling open the unlocked doors and going back to the prep table to wait while the nagas decided if they wanted to participate in this conversation.

"I thought this was happening tomorrow night?" Todo asked cautiously as he pushed his door open wider, looking around the back area before settling his gaze onto me.

"It'll happen tomorrow night, but there's something that I need to talk to you all about right now."

"What is it, (y/n)?" Kara emerged from his enclosure a little, water trickling down his chest and scales, "What thoughts disturb you so?"

"I've always been under the assumption that I'm returning you all home safely, but I recently thought that it may not be a good idea," I watched as Choro, Oso, and Jyushi emerged from their enclosures, "There's a chance that Calmine and his men could follow us back to try and recapture you."

"Let him try," Oso huffed, his voice tense with spite, "The only reason we were taken in the first place was because we weren't expecting them."

"They may try to come again, Oso...!" I shifted my gaze towards the oldest, a small plea in my voice, "I can try to find another place for you all to live--
"

"No," Oso cut me off, advancing into the back area a few feet, "That island is our

home

."

"But--"

"If they want to try to catch us again," Kara spoke up, a heavy hiss in his voice, "They're welcome to try."

The atmosphere in the room shifted from its usual neutral feeling to aggressive hostility, each of the nagas picking up the change in attitude and responding to it as they each echoed out their own hisses or growls. I looked at each naga, seeing their displays of anger and taking a step back before letting in a slow breath.

"All right...I get it," I lowered my gaze before looking back up with an assuring smile, "I'll leave that side of things to you guys, then. Your senses are sharper than mine, and most of you know what to look for now."

"I don't think these humans would be dumb enough to go after something that they lost," Todo puffed out his cheeks a little, dropping the aggression for a moment.

"We're not out of here yet. I've got two other things to do before I've secured a clear way out," Shaking my head towards the yellow-and-pink naga, I raised a hand to my chin, "The next time I open all of your doors, we'll be heading through there."

Pointing towards the double doors that led to the security booth, I watched as the nagas looked towards one another before some of them retreated into their enclosures and closed the doors behind them. That left Oso and Jyushi still looking towards each other for a moment before Oso rolled his eyes and turned away, Jyushi looking back towards me with a wide smile on his face.

"Was that about who I was sleeping with tonight?" I raised an eyebrow when I didn't get an explanation from the reticulated naga.

"Kinda...?" He shrugged a little before he shifted his gaze towards my room, "Did you need anything from there?"

"My room? No, not real--"

I was cut off as Jyushi rushed towards me, wrapping his arms around my shoulders and cutting off my voice as he pressed his cheek against mine, "Then we can go to sleep right now!"

"Wait...! I still have something I need to do, Jyushi..." I struggled against his tight grip for a moment before he released me.

"What else is there to do?" He tilted his head in curiosity, "The lights will turn off soon, and I like counting the clicks with you."

"I've got to return those..." I pointed towards the rock and gloves sitting on the prep table, "If I don't do those now, then I won't get a chance to do it later."

"Ah...I'll be waiting for you, then!" Jyushi shifted his tail into his enclosure and partially closed the door while giving an enthusiastic wave. I waved back until he was out of sight, reaching towards the gloves and rock when a cold hand intercepted mine. My shocked gaze quickly travelled up the arm and locked eyes with the familiar red-and-black eyes of Oso.

"Tell me what you're not telling them."

"Wha--"

"What happens if this goes wrong," His tone didn't form a question despite the uncertainty in his face.

"Should I fail this, then we'd have to force our way out...and that means humans with weapons would pursue us. The weapons they'd have wouldn't knock you out for a small amount of time...they'd kill you," I relaxed my arm, and Oso shifted his grip to hold my hand gently, "The humans wouldn't listen to anything you'd try to tell them, and I'd either die with you all or be taken alive and thrown into a long and devastating process that would find me guilty of allowing you all to roam free."

His hand tightened around mine as I spoke, the uncertainty falling away to more anger in his eyes.

"Then make sure that doesn't happen," Oso leaned in close, his free fingers pushing away some of the hair on my forehead before softly resting his lips against my skin. When he pulled away from the kiss, he released my hand and disappeared into his enclosure, the door closing behind him.

I couldn't help but stare at the enclosure as I rested a hand on my forehead, my heart unsure of how to feel from Oso's light kiss.

Walking down the hallway with the rock that injured me and the pair of gloves that I borrowed, I knocked on the window of the security booth, waving to the officer inside and motioning towards the three items laying on my arm.

"

Did you need to return those?

" The intercom buzzed to life and a female voice came through, sounding like the same one from yesterday.

"Yeah. You don't need to call anyone for it, as I can just use a guest pass or something," I commented confidently with a friendly smile on my face. There were a few moments of silence before the intercom clicked live again.

"

All right. Come on through and I'll see what I can do for you.

"

I swallowed an excited scream as the secured double doors unlocked, allowing me to push my way through and turn the small extended corner to see the entry door to the security booth wide open.

"Can I return these real quick?"

"Are you going to need to get back in there over the weekend?" The officer returned my question with another one, turning in her swivel chair to look

at me.

The office itself wasn't something to write home about, clearly set up for recording video of the reptile house with several camera feeds showing on the smaller television screens, some of them blinking with a blue outline that indicated movement of some sort. I could see the six original screens that I walked by when I first came here, seeing two of the nagas curled up on the various terrain obstacles as they turned in for sleep. Oso's, Kara's, Jyushi's, and Ichi's screens showed an 'empty' enclosure. Soft talking could be heard in the office and the officer had a cellphone propped up against some of the 3-ring binders as an impromptu phone holder, a video playing on the screen. There was a handheld radio that I could see, probably connected to the network of other security officers that patrolled the entirety of the zoo.

"Yeah, probably," I nodded, responding quickly to not draw her attention to what I was focusing on, "One of the enclosures had a pretty rough setup and I wanna make sure that

this

doesn't happen to the naga or myself again."

I motioned towards the long cut on my exposed arm with a nod. Her eyes focused on it for a moment before nodding, turning around and pulling open a small drawer underneath the desk she was sitting at. I saw several plastic keycards stored in individual neck lanyards with black writing on the sleeve, labelling each card's purpose. There was a smaller divot in the drawer that caught my attention, seeing a few keys with smaller tags on them and two large silver keys tied to a single keyring that was clearly labeled 'FIRE KEY'.

That was what I needed.

That

was our way out.

"Here," The officer held out a keycard with the writing 'TEMP MAIN.' scrawled on it, "This will get you in and out of those doors. I'll inform my relief that you've got the card until Saturday."

"Thanks so much!" I put the lanyard around my neck as I gave her a thankful smile, "I'm gonna start working on that enclosure tomorrow, so I'll be in and out."

"As long as you don't take too many supplies, I don't think the guys will mind," She laughed in response.

"With these scrawny arms?" My happiness bled into my laughter before I turned around and made my way towards the supply room, dropping off the rock near some other scrapped enrichment and placing the gloves right where I had gotten them from.

With a wave to the officer as I used the keycard to get into the back area, I quickly took off the keycard and put it inside my duffle bag.

I couldn't help but smile to myself.

Chapter 29

Everything had been going right for the escape plan and that put me on edge throughout most of the night, apologizing to Jyushi as I tossed and turned in his arms. He had tried to make me as comfortable as he could, but my mind was restless from how well everything was progressing. I forced myself to finally lay still as my back pressed against Jyushi's chest, his arms around my shoulders and waist to keep me close while his tail ensured that I was staying in the middle of the large branch he had chosen as a bed.

"...you're still awake," Jyushi didn't sound tired, almost as if he had stayed up with me the whole time.

"My mind won't stay still," I sighed, closing my eyes for a moment before shifting my poor vision up towards the ceiling, "I can't help but feel like something is going to go wrong tomorrow."

"Are you always thinking about the future?"

"It's one of my downfalls," A small laugh pulled itself from my throat, "Humans can't help but worry about what lies beyond today, whether we realize it or not. We're always planning ahead."

"That sounds tiring," Jyushi huffed as he rested his chin on top of my head, the rumble of him speaking felt along my back and neck.

"It is really tiring."

"We don't live like that. We only really worry when one of our needs isn't immediately met, like food or water," His hands tightened their grip for a moment before loosening once more, "There was a time where there was a long dry season on the island and we couldn't find any water that wasn't salty."

"Really?" I shifted my hands over his, "What happened?"

"Well, Kara found out that some kind of leaf held water inside it and he shared the knowledge with us. We were able to hold out for a few more weeks without water because of his find...a large rainstorm hit our island with torrential rain and a furious wind that made me almost fell from my tree, but our water supplies were back!"

"Sounds like I'll need to be careful," My thoughts finally shifted from tomorrow and towards figuring out a way to craft a way to hold water.

"You won't need to worry about anything," Jyushi's head moved from the top of my head, resting his cheek against mine, "We'll take good care of you."

"I know you all will," I raised a hand to his other cold cheek, pressing against it to keep our heads together for a moment before releasing him. When I moved my hand away, he released my waist and pinned my hand on his other cheek, a small rumble rolling from his throat that I came to call a 'purr' of sorts. Jyushi was the only one to do it, and it made me laugh a little, "Did I take away the warmth too fast?"

A light nod from him was my answer. A soft smile rested on my lips as I closed my eyes once more, the slow breathing sounds from Jyushi slowly pulling me into sleep.

With the heating system waking me up like an impromptu alarm clock, I had enough time to retrieve the laptop from Ichi before the zoo workers arrived for their shift. The lavender corn naga had fallen asleep wrapped around the computer, a livestream of some kind of kitten room still playing when I gently woke him up.

I double checked the e-mail to make sure there were no planning changes, and I'd be checking it throughout the day to adjust for anything Jeff alerted me to. I couldn't break out the nagas before the helicopter had landed, as much as I wanted to, as they'd be so easy to spot out in the open.

With the clock showing 8:15 a.m., I had less than twelve hours before our ride landed.

When the zoo opened, I sequestered myself to the bedroom and dug through the duffel bag, emptying out all of its contents onto the bed. Throwing the dirty clothes into the washer, I carefully folded the clean clothes back into the duffel bag and stared at the field journal that had started this entire mess. It was damaged from constant handling, the pages clearly showing the water-logged damage from when it fell into the river, and the spine was partially bent from whoever handled it during the transition from the poachers to Calmine.

My lips curled into a snarl and I roughly grabbed the book, holding it high while I contemplated throwing it into the trash bin. What had started as a genuine curiosity for new life had warped into something that had been profited from, my hard work twisted into something that I couldn't recognize as my own anymore.

Turning hard on my heel, I slammed the field journal down into my duffel bag.

If nothing else, the paper would make for good tinder for starting a fire.

My laundry progressed uninterrupted and I stuffed a few other things from the kitchen into the duffel bag, such as a few knives that would help me survive on the island. I carefully wrapped the blades with clothes that I didn't much care for, knowing they wouldn't be much of a loss if they got cut up during the flight. Satisfied with everything that I was bringing along, I closed up the duffel bag and lay it on the bed.

I would have to leave the laptop behind since there wasn't going to be any practical use for it on the uninhabited island. It needed to be factory reset before I left, but that would be much later tonight.

Leaning against the prep table and looking around the back area, I looked for anything to do...anything that would pass the time without giving away that I was simply waiting.

"(Y/n)...?"

My ears caught the soft voice calling out my name as my attention shifted towards the opening door of Ichi's enclosure, "Ichi? What is it?"

"...I think that wound is starting to hurt," He had a hand covering the stab wound on his waist as he leaned against the door a little. I moved towards him and knelt in front of his waist when I was close enough, letting him reveal the wound to me.

It hadn't looked any worse than yesterday, but the edges were starting to puff up a little.

"May I touch it?" I glanced up towards Ichi for permission before focusing on the wound when he responded with a nod. I carefully prodded my index fingers around the edges, not directly touching the red inflammation areas. The wound shifted a little with the skin, but didn't bleed any fluid. It was still in the process of healing, "It doesn't look terrible. It looks like it's starting to heal over, so we're going to just leave it be for now. Since it's on your skin, a scab should form over it, but let me know if it gets any worse than this, okay?"

"Okay..." He didn't look sure, but agreed regardless.

"Something else on your mind?" I stood back up with a small grunt.

"Not really..."

"Just let me know if I can do something for you," I watched as Ichi pulled away from the door, his dark eyes glancing over his shoulders back towards me before he disappeared from the view of the door, "Ichi...?"

"...you're not going to leave me behind, are you?" His voice was dark, but there was a tenderness there that I couldn't miss. I took a few steps into the enclosure and quickly reached for his hand, grasping it tightly and turning his torso towards me as I straddled over his tail.

"Of course not!" I met his dark eyes, the surprise at my outburst plain to see from his expression, "Ichi, I'm not leaving any of you behind! There's no way I'd do that..."

Silence filled the enclosure as Ichi's eyes swept over my form before yanking his hand free from mine, a dark look passing over his eyes as he moved away from me a little more.

"Ich--"

"Just...leave me be for now," He fully turned away from me as I furrowed my brow.

"No, I won't. If you need to say something, then tell me. I'm not going to know otherwise."

Ichi clicked his tongue against his cheek, the 'tsk' sound loud in the silence before gathering his tail underneath him, "I don't want you to know."

"Saying that isn't going to deter me, Ichi," I took another step closer, recognizing the dull pattern around his waist as my mind put two and two together. His wound was getting aggravated because Ichi was starting to show signs of shedding and I didn't know what to look for in his behavior when that happened, "I only want to help you and your brothers."

"What can you and your limited lifespan do for us, huh?" The growl in Ichi's voice deepened as his volume grew louder, "You'll be gone in the blink of an eye for us, and we'll forget about you!"

"Then I'll do what I can to make sure that blink is the happiest moment of your life," I held out my arms to my sides, "So what if you'll live forever? If I only live to be 40 or 50 years old, then I'll do my damnedest to make sure that I can make you happy for those years."

"I don't want you to make me happy; I want to make

you

happy!" His words stilled my thoughts, my heart thudding in my chest before I realized a massive length of tail had even hit me. I was slammed against the back wall, my head bouncing off the drywall and knocking me senseless, my body limply sliding to the ground as the length of tail kept my back pressed against the firm surface, "You don't even know how you've made me feel these past few...(y/n)...?"

I could hear his voice change as he realized what had happened, my thoughts a jumbled mess as I tried to get control of my body. His tail released me before his hands caught my shoulders as I began to slump forward, shifting me to lay down as he hovered over my head. I fought to regain control of my limbs, my mind no longer rattling in my skull. Fingers moved, toes wiggled, my legs felt heavy and my arms were slow to respond.

"(Y/n), please wake up...!" Ichi's eyes closed, squeezing out a few tears that fell onto my cheeks, sliding down my face, "Dammit, don't die...!"

"It'll take...a bit more than that," I gave him a gentle smile as I raised a trembling hand up to rest on his wet cheek. He flinched at the physical contact, his eyes opening wide before shifting his arms underneath me, lifting me up into a hug.

"I'm so sorry...(y/n), maybe you should just leave me behind," His throat tensed up as I felt more tears fall onto my back, "I've never done anything right...!"

"You can always start with the present," When I was able to move my arms freely, I brought them up around his back, holding him close as I felt him fall apart.

"No, I can't..." His fingers dug into my shirt, clinging to me as sobs wracked his body, "I'm such a useless piece of trash...There's so much that you've done for me -- for my brothers -- that I can't even start to pay you back...!

"All I've ever done is be cruel to you because I was scared of what I'd feel," Ichi's voice grew tense as he clenched his jaw, "I only ever cause problems for my brothers...and I can't think of something good happening to

me

!"

His words devolved into sobbing, mumbling every so often about how I shouldn't be kind to him, or that I need to leave him alone so he would stop hurting me. His fingers and arms pressed me closer to him, my hands starting to lightly rub circles into his back as I let him tire himself out. It was very clear that he blamed himself for most of the bad things that happened to me, including what happened during the night of the raid.

Ichi shifted his weight to the side and we fell to the ground, holding each other while he let his emotions out. I didn't rush him to let me go and I didn't care how much time passed.

His sobbing slowly shifted to hiccups before he regained his steady breathing, still clinging to me when Ichi moved upwards. Ensuring my feet were firmly planted on the ground, Ichi slowly pulled away from me as his hands moved from my back to my shoulders.

"I--"

"I don't hate you," I spoke softly into the silence. His shocked reaction shifted into a relieved look that quickly morphed into more crying, leaning down until his forehead rested on my right shoulder as his hands gripped my upper arms, "There's not much you can do to make me hate you, Ichi...I'm not going to leave you behind here, and I'm going to live as long as I can when we make it to your island."

"But..."

"...my lifespan may be shorter than yours, but I still mean what I said," I finished his question, "It may be over in a blink, but I'll make sure that single blink is filled with good memories."

Closing the distance between us, I softly rested my lips on his forehead and pulled away a few seconds later. His lips chased mine, connecting in a full kiss before he moved away, a light dusting of pink rising on his cheeks.

Chapter 30

I couldn't help but stare at the lavender corn naga, watching him retreat behind one of the fallen logs as my fingers reached up to rest against my lips. The interaction between us had been blocked by the black wall by one of the few standing trees, using the disguised pillar as something to lean against for the moment.

Ichi kissed me on the lips,

willingly

.

"Ichi..." I called out softly, hearing a light hiss as a response, "I appreciate the kiss."

When I only got silence as my answer, I stayed inside the enclosure for a few more moments before leaving and closing his door behind me.

I fought the blush that tried to rise in my cheeks, reminding myself firmly that I needed to focus on remaining as unassuming as possible until the zoo closed for the day. There were two hours between when the zoo closed to when the helicopter landed, and I'd be needing those two hours to prepare the nagas for escape. If they were the size of their full-bodied counterparts, then I would've had no problem carrying them out on my person. But each of their bodies were the equivalent size of a human, which meant that I was dealing with twenty-plus feet of length on each naga. They weren't a size that I could just carry out.

I paused as I rested a hand on Choro's door, a rake in my other hand. The thought hadn't occurred to me before, but would the nagas be okay crossing the rough pavement? Kara was actively in shed and Ichi was cutting it really close with his cycle. I'm sure the others would be fine for the short trek, but I was worried about what effect the rough pavement would have

on the outer keratin layer. Considering their size, I wouldn't be able to carry either one of them...

"Are you waiting for permission?" The door opened, pushing itself into my shoulder before I took a step back. Choro partially leaned out through the doorway, looking down at me with a questioning look on his face.

"Ah, no," I shook my head, opening the door all the way before stepping in as the green mamba naga gave me room, "I was busy thinking about 'what ifs' for tonight."

"Anything that I can help with?" He deftly moved out of the way of the rake and swiftly climbed up one of the closer 'trees' to let me do my job, "I mean...there's not much I can do, but I've been told that I'm a great person to talk to."

"Who told you that?" I looked up at him with a raised eyebrow.

"Eh, someone from beyond that black wall," Curling his coils underneath him, Choro rested his arms on the topmost loop and lay his chin on them, "I've heard them talk to me before when I was relaxing near it."

"Were they just talking to you?" I started my raking job, partially interested in what Choro had experienced.

"It sounded like it," Choro moved along the branches with me, staying out of my way but remaining close so we didn't have to shout to each other, "At first, it sounded like the same person coming by every day. She'd sit in the right corner and just talk about things. I wasn't sure if she was talking to me or Oso, since she said both of our names pretty often...but this person started to only talk to me."

"She must've felt like you were listening to her," I stepped over a small pile of dirty substrate before focusing on the area closer to the black wall, "Do you know if she worked here?"

"No, it just sounded like she visited the zoo frequently because she had a connection with animals, or something like that."

"Have you heard her since the raid?"

"Yeah, quite a few times," He let an arm dangle down, his fingers brushing against the top of my head as I worked underneath him, "She talked about really different things that she felt were going wrong in her life. Some things called 'skool' and 'classes'?"

"Ah, her education then," I felt a slight tug on my hair before looking up at him, seeing Choro examine one of my loose hairs between his fingers, "It's a process that all humans go through as they grow up, and an optional process that some adults continue to put themselves through to achieve their dreams."

"Have you gone through this 'skool' process?" His attention switched from my hair to my colored hues.

"Yeah, and I've gone through the optional process, too."

"What did it let you do?"

"It let me meet you all," I leaned against the rake a little, "It wasn't supposed to, but life has a funny way of not caring about someone's personal goals."

"The island..." There was a faraway look in Choro's eyes as he let my hair fall from his fingertips, completely relaxing on the branch he was on, "When Jyushi had mentioned that he had found a strange friend, we didn't know what he was talking about. There was someone else on the island that was a human female, but she didn't match the description that Jyushi told us...so we avoided her. We were planning on introducing ourselves whenever you wandered the island, but Todo and Ichi went silent and we couldn't find them. Kara was the closest to their areas, so when he went quiet...we all panicked."

I remained quiet as Choro spoke, giving him my full attention.

"Jyushi was worried that something was going to happen to you, so he told us to keep an eye out if you were in the area. You and the others happened

to wander back into my part of the island, and Oso had warned me to keep you alive," The distant look disappeared from his dark green eyes as he looked back at me, "When those humans hit you with a soft piece of wood, I couldn't stop myself from attacking them. I wasn't sure how fragile humans were or if they could take a hit to the head, but I didn't want to wait and find out."

"So, you attacked them when they attacked me."

"Failed spectacularly, but I was able to get Oso to your exact location," Choro slightly nodded, "When Jyushi and I were taken into those metal cages, we had to rely on you and Oso."

"And

we

failed spectacularly..." I ran a hand through my hair, frustration pulling my lips into a light frown. The memory of seeing how badly Oso had been beaten by the poachers, the sight of his body limply hanging by the chains in the cargo container, sent a pang through my heart.

"You're making it right again, though," A light tug on my hair drew my attention back up to Choro, his eyes meeting mine with a smile, "I'm just happy that you're not like the other humans that tried to take us away from here."

"If I was, I don't think I'd ever forgive myself for willingly participating in keeping you all here against your will. I don't think I'd survive the first day stepping into your rooms."

"No, probably not," The naga gave a short laugh as he let the strands drift down through his fingers once more, "We're not very forgiving."

Five hours until the helicopter arrived. Jeff had said nothing of a rescheduled landing, so I was still under the guess that everything was still

going fine.

I had gone through the enclosures and raked up the dirty substrate, continuing the trend of acting like I was just doing my job. After cleaning out Kara's enclosure, I walked back into it and sat with him near his soaking pond. He was a little irritated that I smelled like his brothers, but he kept his irritation at bay with the warm water flowing over his dulling scales.

"So, you think you can charm me with your singing?" I gave a soft smile as Kara traced some kind of line over my bare calf, my legs stretched out along the pool as I reclined on my elbows. I had worn shorts and a short sleeve shirt for the day, knowing that I couldn't let my movement be restricted.

"I know I can..." Kara shifted his copper gaze from my bare leg up to my eyes, a knowing smile settling on his lips as he shifted closer, "I just don't want to enthrall you."

"Why not?"

"Because you're not my prey."

There was something in his voice that made a shudder race down my spine, hiding the reaction by shaking my head in disbelief, "I'm sure that there were some points in time where I could've been on the island."

"You look too beautiful to be prey, (y/n)," Kara dipped his hand into the water again, satisfied with the nonsensical water drawing he left on my calf.

"They say that some of the most beautiful creatures in the world are the most dangerous predators," I leaned up into a sitting position, resting my chin against my free palm.

"Wouldn't you need to worry about me eating you up, then?"

"Why's that?"

"You can't see it because I'm about to shed, but I can make a dazzling display," Kara shifted a small length of his tail up onto the shoreline,

showing off the dulled teal-blue coloration. I pulled myself away from the edge, realizing that the tail was starting to curl around my right leg.

"Careful now. I still have to 'work' for a few more hours," Reaching a finger down, I poked at his scales, watching as his muscles responded to my touch and pulled his tail back into the water, "Just keep soaking here."

"Right," Kara gave a small huff, his intentions quite clear in his eyes, but the frustrated look was soon replaced by a knowing smile, "No incidents."

"It still looks wrong."

"Todo, I can't keep rearranging your room every time I come in here," I groaned as I shoved a heavy paper-mache boulder to the directed spot by the pink-colored naga, rubbing my shoulder as the large rock fit into the divot that was previously made for it.

"I don't tell you to do it

every

time," Todo came over and rested his left elbow on my right shoulder, aggravating the new bruise from the boulder, "No, this still doesn't look right..."

"Can you just bear with it for another three hours?" My tone made my frustration obvious. He rounded to face me, his tail coiling tightly around my legs to keep me still while his dark eyes swept around the immediate area.

"I've been trying to get you to move that rock for almost two weeks," Todo's eyes almost took on a coppery sheen, "Since you hurt yourself on that tiny pebble, I didn't want to see you injure yourself any more than necessary. Surely, a human like you can move this big rock easily."

"Big ro-" I repeated his words in shock before furrowing my eyebrows, "You

do

realize that I can hurt myself just as easily moving this thing every which way, right?"

"Oh, please."

"Todo, I'm not as strong as you think I am. I can't lift boulders that are my height in their

width

, much less keep moving it without suffering some kind of injury," I felt his coils tighten around my legs sharply, drawing a yelp from my throat as my foot shifted from the movement, sending me falling to the ground.

"You really are a useless human," Todo leaned over me with a disinterested look on his face.

"You were more tolerable when you were in shed..." I muttered, not caring if he heard me. From my partially locked position on the ground, I pushed down on his coils and felt him finally loosen me from his grip.

"See, this is what I meant by 'attitude adjustment'," He pulled away, gathering his tail underneath him. I gritted my teeth and shot him a withering glare.

"And

this

is why I rarely visit you!"

Todo's dark eyes narrowed into a glare, his human half recoiling as if I had hit him physically. Without missing a beat, he launched towards me and I used my hands as barriers to keep his own hands from grabbing me. Shifting to the side, Todo spun me towards the boulder and rushed forward once more, pinning me to the large rock with his hands keeping mine above my head.

"You rarely visit me because you don't know how to handle me," His voice took on a threatening tone, challenging me to fight him, "You rarely visit because I'm not like my brothers, and I don't bend over easily just because you smell good."

"I don't visit you because we get into verbal fights almost every time," I tried to push against his hands, feeling his muscles flexing to keep me still. Compared to the other nagas, Todo was significantly smaller, almost half of Jyushi's length, but that didn't seem to matter when it came to his raw strength, "You're right, though, Todo...I don't know how to approach you without making you mad at me."

"Then just ask!" His exhale shifted into a hiss, "I hear you asking my brothers things to get to know them more, so why don't you just ask me?"

My words died on my lips as I stared at him in shock. The one thing that I had promised myself I wouldn't do to these nagas...I had broken. I ignored Todo because of his harsh attitude towards me, despite giving Oso many chances when he almost killed me. The pink dotted naga searched my face for some kind of reaction, lowering his head to my left shoulder when he found what he was looking for.

"Yes, I'm stubborn...but you haven't shown anything of what Jyushi claims you have."

"...and what has he told you of me?"

"Jyushi said that you were cautious but exciting to be around, that you had a driving curiosity that burned in your heart," He slightly pulled his head away, the dark bangs hiding his coppery eyes in shadow, "I've only seen the cautious part."

"Then let me apologize."

"For how you've treated me for months? I don't think so."

"Then tell me how I can make it up to you," I didn't fight against his hands as they shifted on mine, his fingers intertwining with my own as he leaned

in closer.

"Be my slave."

There was something in his eyes telling me to challenge him, to defy his demand. I didn't understand what kind of reaction he wanted from me, and it was all my fault for not trying to understand the youngest naga.

"If that's what you want, then I'll be your slave," I shifted my shoulders uncomfortably, "Whatever it would take to please you, then I'll do it."

He pulled away with such force that my arms were dragged forward and thrown down by momentum, "Then you'll start when the flying thing leaves tonight."

Thirty minutes until the zoo closed before another two hour wait until I let the nagas free.

I was scrubbing the dirtied tools from cleaning the naga's enclosures when I heard the elevator chime out its arrival. My face paled as I turned to look at the occupants of the elevator car, watching Karl, Calmine, and two other men step out from the elevator.

Chapter 31

"Gentlemen, this is the wonderful woman who's been keepin' yawr nagas safe an' healthy while they've stayed here," Calmine raised his hand towards me, palm up like he was offering for me to speak, "She's also the one tha' notified us o' their existence on a small island, kindly volunteering her time tah ensure their comfort during the flight over."

I stiffened slightly at his words, fighting from glaring at the men who were more than likely the private 'owners'. Switching quickly to a pleased smile, I wiped my hands off and held out my right hand to offer a handshake.

"Pleased to meet you both. My name is (y/n) (l/n), and am I correct in guessing that you're here to see the nagas before they leave for your private collections?"

"You'd be correct, yes," The taller of the two strangers gave a curt nod, his hands straightening his jacket and falling back to his side, "We're here for a private tour of the creatures, and to make sure that they're not...

damaged

before they ship out on Saturday. You'll be giving us a more intimate look at how these creatures operate?"

The question was a formality. I

had

to take these greedy moneybags into the enclosures so they could inspect their 'goods'.

"Of course," The smile on my lips widened to hide my frustration as I lowered my hand to my side, "It would be my pleasure."

"Very well," The shorter of the two sniffed, pressing a handkerchief against his nose before tucking it into the breast pocket of his business suit jacket. Calmine began talking business with them while I moved towards the enclosures, hearing someone follow me on my heels. Glancing behind, my lips curled into a sneer as Karl's dark blue eyes stared into mine.

"What."

"You're being surprisingly obedient despite your earlier attitude towards the monsters being locked away," His voice was low, intending on being quiet around the three businessmen, "You're not gonna tell them to kill, are you?"

"I'm not that dumb," I grunted as I made a show of 'unlocking' Jyushi's enclosure. If they wanted to see how friendly or scary the nagas could be, I'd show them the best example of both, "Unlike you, I actually care about those around me and treat them like a fellow human being."

The door swung open wide and I quickly entered the enclosure before the three men started walking towards it, intent on finding Jyushi to tell him what was happening. Karl was still close on my heels, probably not realizing that this was the naga that crushed some of his ribs. I had a small wave of satisfaction when I spotted the white-and-yellow scales looped over a low 'branch', seeing Karl freeze as I reached up and poked the scales.

"Jyushi, are you awake?"

"...(y/n)? (Y/--!" Jyushi lifted his head sleepily from his coils, blinking down at me before the wide smile instantly turned into a snarl as his orange eyes focused on who was standing behind me.

"No, stop!" I stepped into Jyushi's line of attack with a narrowed glare, breaking his focus on Karl and making him look back at me, "We have

visitors

that are here to see you, Jyushi. I

need

you to be nice to them and answer any questions they have for you."

Jyushi's snarl fell from his face and realization fluttered in his eyes as he registered my pointed words, a pensive look crossing his face before he lowered himself from the limb, "Okay."

"Are...you sure about this?" Karl asked quietly, keeping me between him and Jyushi as the naga adjusted himself, "You know he's-"

"I know what he's capable of, Karl. I don't need your input," I harshly whispered before turning to see the three suited men step into the enclosure, "Gentleman, this is Jyushi. He's a naga that has the same coloration and patterning of an albino reticulated python."

"Oh, it has a name?" The taller one questioned, his tone bored. The shorter man sniffed again before walking right up to Jyushi, his hands instantly pressing against the scales near his waist while his fingers dug into the skin line. I held back from intervening, biting the inside of my cheek harshly while I watched Jyushi flinch back, staring bewildered at the man and tilting his head in curiosity.

"What are you doing?" Jyushi's tongue started to flick out of his mouth rapidly, his own hands pressing down against his belly, "Is there something on me?"

The man flinched back as the forked tongue gently patted the top of his head, staring up at the reticulated naga before looking back towards the taller man, "It's real--!"

"Of course I'm real," Jyushi smiled, "I'm just as real as my brothers."

"All right, Stuart," The taller man glanced towards Calmine, "You've convinced us."

He strode up to Jyushi before placing a hand underneath his jawline and moving the naga's head, his thumb briefly stroking the few scales that were popping up through the skin. Jyushi didn't physically react and kept his eyes

locked on the man, the black pupils growing wide from their normally slitted state.

Hold on, Jyushi...

"Are there any injuries on this creature that we should be aware of?" The taller man looked over his shoulder at me.

"I'm fine."

"There's nothing wrong with his health," I responded after Jyushi, "He's capable of understanding us, so you can ask him instead of referring through me."

He hummed as a frown pulled at his lips, focusing back on Jyushi before releasing his jaw, "Open your mouth."

Jyushi complied and responded how I hoped he would.

His lips parted fully down to his ears, revealing the entirety of his mouth. Two half-oval rows of sharpened teeth lined the roof of his mouth, one row smaller than the other with each tooth curved back towards his throat and pushing through the protective fleshy layers. A large half-oval of teeth mirrored the larger row along his bottom jaw, curved backwards like the others. Bright pink flesh pressed against itself as a hollow tunnel revealed itself along the middle of the bottom jaw, his forked tongue sliding out before flicking back in. There was no uvula at the back of his throat.

I stared at his mouth in awe, surprised that there was nothing human about Jyushi's mouth and wondering if the others were just like their snake counterparts.

"Good Lord!" One man exclaimed.

"Shut it! Shut it!" The other ordered, horrified at what his own demand brought. Jyushi quickly closed it before licking his lips, his eyes looking towards me as a smile rested on his face.

"Good God, Calmine," The first turned towards Calmine, who looked just as spooked as the others, "I had thought the pictures were fabricated!"

"Why would ah allow good men such as yawrselves tah purchase these majestic creatures iff'n they were fake?"

Because you want money

, I bitterly thought before realizing that the three businessmen were making their way towards the enclosure entrance. I quickly went to Jyushi and pressed my hands against his cheeks, feeling him start to purr and push his head into my palms.

"Did I do okay?"

"You did wonderful, Jyushi," I gently brought his forehead down to mine, pressing them together for a brief moment before pulling away, "I need to warn Kara and the others. I'll be back later tonight."

Karl followed right behind me as I moved from Jyushi's enclosure to Kara's, the three men standing by the door like a patient crowd waiting to get into an event. 'Unlocking' his door and opening it wide, I went to find Kara still lounging in the 'pond'.

"(Y/n), is something going on?" His copper eyes shifted from the wall between his and Jyushi's enclosures, "I heard shouting."

"Yes, something's going on, but it should be over quickly," I tried to reassure him, kneeling along the shoreline to speak to him at face level, "There's some visitors that want to see what you're like up close. Please bear with anything they do."

"What about--"

"I'll be back later tonight," I quickly answered, shifting my eyes towards Karl's direction before Kara had an understanding look on his face.

"Very well!" His voice grew louder, "They are able to come and see my wonderful self, despite the shedding I'm about to go through."

"Is it an aquatic thing?" The voice of the taller man sounded like it was walking closer, pushing through the foliage before the men in suits were in plain view.

"Of course not!" Kara sounded offended, rising up to his usual height, "I prefer to live up in the trees, though at a much higher level than what I have here."

"An arboreal snake, then. Do you also have the fangs and venom that we've been warned about?"

"Certainly," The naga flashed a quick smile before yawning and flexing his fangs for a moment before closing his mouth, "I believe that I've already given my precious venom to help other humans."

"Calmine, you madman," The shorter man scoffed as he glanced towards the flabby man, "You

milked

these things?!"

"Milked...?" Kara whispered towards me, his head moving down a little

"Shorter word for 'extraction'," I quickly responded.

"Why nah?" Calmine answered with a jovial laugh, his personality in full asskissing mode, "They were asked if they were wantin' tah donate their venom, an' it was done by a professional."

The two collectors leaned towards each other, exchanging whispers before they shifted the conversation back towards Calmine

"The one that really interested us,"

Please not Todo...

"was the one labelled as a Liophidium pattoni."

Fuck...

I rubbed the heel of my palm against my forehead, trying to disguise my frustrations as an annoying itch. I had hoped that they'd just look at the nagas and leave, but this was starting to turn into a thorough investigation of their investments.

"(Y/n)?" Kara lightly reached out to touch my back, lowering himself back into the water as the men talked amongst themselves.

"I'm fine, Kara..."

His lips tightened before relaxing, shifting his gaze from me to Karl before fully submerging back into the water.

"(Y/n), they're waiting for your answer," Karl caught my attention, my eyes snapping up to see the three businessmen looking at me.

"I'm sorry, I didn't hear the question," I gave an apologetic smile.

"We were discussing your relations with these creatures, and wanted to know what exactly it is that connects you to them."

"I'm merely the person that found them, as Mr. Calmine explained. I was of the understanding that I would not be needed once the nagas were transferred into your care," I winced at my own words, knowing that Kara was still able to hear me despite being underwater. I'd have to come back to explain that the escape was

not

them being transferred into another prison.

"That's still correct," The shorter man huffed indignantly, "We just didn't know if there was anything

else

tying you to these beasts."

"No," I answered sharply, clenching my fists and staring at Calmine while continuing, "There is nothing else."

"All right. Let's go see the Liophidium pattoni, then."

I started to follow them out before I felt a hand grip my left forearm tightly, spinning me around to face Karl.

"Are you mad?" He stared into my left eye, the right still covered by the eyepatch, "Stop challenging Calmine in front of the investors."

"If I wanted to challenge him, then I would've gone to Oso's enclosure first," I yanked my arm out of his grip, "Here I was, wondering why the hell you'd even mention me carrying hybrids..."

"The offer is still on table..." Karl smirked, his eyes dancing over my figure before shifting behind me. He lost his teasing look and quickly moved to catch up to the others.

"Kara..." I started to turn towards him before I felt his hands on my shoulders, keeping me facing away.

"Don't...I know that what you said was what they wanted to hear," His voice was soft, but I could still hear the tension in his throat. Kara's fingers dug into my shoulders a little before pushing me forward, "Be careful around them...please..."

"I will," I swung my hand back, catching his for a brief moment before continuing towards the door. 'Locking' it behind me, I went towards Todo's enclosure and waited for the men to be interested in seeing him, glancing towards the clock.

Fifteen minutes before the zoo closed.

"Nah, Ms. (Y/n), would yah kindly show these gentlemen tha' special creature tha' was picked up with'in the others?" Calmine waved his hand towards the other enclosures in a sweeping motion, that fake smile resting above his chins.

"Sure," With an enthusiasm that I tried to make sound genuine, I skipped over Ichi's room and lay a hand on Todo's door. When my back was facing towards the 'touring' group, I closed my eyes as a frown settled on my face, my imagination running through various scenarios about

why

they wanted to see Todo so badly.

It could've been for the money or possibly just curiosity because the snake he looked like was recently discovered, but my biggest fear was that Todo wasn't going to survive in their hands. Snakes with unique patterns never survive for very long when in the hands of greedy humans, their skins often ending up as molds for fabricating faux snakeskin products...

"Todo, you have some visitors," I announced as the door swung open, seeing him emerge from his lounging spot along the wall in front of the entrance. He had been recently digging through the substrate, some bits of leaves and dirt still clinging to his skin and scales like a stubborn burr.

"Who are they?" He tone was cautious, raising an eyebrow when the aforementioned people walked through the door behind me. Todo raised himself a little higher while coming closer to me.

"They're visitors that wanted to stop by to see you, Todo," I didn't know how good he was at picking up my social cues like Jyushi and Kara were, but I had to hope they were on the same level, "We've already stopped by to say 'hello' to your brothers Jyushi and Kara."

"You skipped over Ichi?" He scoffed lightly.

"I'm sure we'll be seeing him later," My hopes were dashed as the naga furrowed his eyebrows, looking questioningly at me before looking over the strange men. I had to stop him from saying anything dumb, "They were so

fascinated

by the colors of your scales that they wanted to see it for themselves."

His eyes lit up, holding his chin a little higher, "Well, of course they would! I told you that I was special when I was brought here, and finally someone sees me for the perfection that I am. You're more than welcome to gaze at me."

Todo shifted his tail into a more relaxed position, specifically showing off his pink rearmost scales and running a hand through his hair that held the same colored spots as his tail. As he leaned over and carefully picked the debris from the substrate off of his pink scales, the two collectors spoke to each other in hushed tones while pointing their fingers at different parts of Todo's body. I clenched my teeth as I heard 'print' and 'design', swallowing my defensive words.

"Stuart, once again I'm impressed by what you've brought back to the wonderful United States of America," The tall man verbally preened the fat lard called Calmine, "You've yet to disappoint us with these wondrous creatures that you keep finding and showing to the public. Truly, you're a blessing to the field of science and discovery."

I saw Todo start to speak, his eyes quickly switching from pride to spite, swiftly smacking the back of my hand against his and taking a step towards him like I was trying to help him clean himself off.

"Don't say anything..." I whispered as quietly as I could while the circle jerk of praise was happening between the businessmen.

"But-" Todo looked between me and the men, cutting himself off in frustration before settling down.

"Ms. (Y/n), there is still one more creature tha' these'n two gentlemen would like tah see," Calmine looked like he was just called to receive some kind of award, "Would you kindly show them tah the red-headed krait?"

Chapter 32

"You mean Oso, Mr. Calmine?" I fought to keep a neutral look on my face. While Oso was quick to pick up information, I couldn't imagine how he'd react when the man who ordered his family's capture stepped into his room. My heart almost stopped when I realized why Calmine was letting me stay in the enclosures while his rich friends were chit-chatting about the nagas.

I

was the insurance that kept the nagas from attacking the men, the pawn chess piece that kept the powerful queen from grabbing the king. If they wanted a chance at killing Calmine, they would be throwing me into the fire...and I couldn't let that happen. Not with almost two hours left before the helicopter arrived.

"Whatever it likes to call itself," The taller man interjected, "We'd like to see the oldest creature here, to see if it's health has returned from the troublesome flight over."

"Of course...to see his old injuries..." My voice faltered as I gave a small nod, a fake smile turning up the corners of my lips, "Just give me a quick moment to let him know about your intentions. He's not too fond of people touching him."

The three suits gave alternating stares as I moved towards Oso's enclosure, feeling Karl reach out and grab a fistful of my shirt from the back, twisting it into a tight wad before dragging me close to him.

"Get-!"

"Shut your damned mouth," His voice was low as his breath hit my right ear, "If that bastard so much as twitches a fucking finger towards me, I'm using you as a shield."

"...you know that'll only make him madder..." I barely turned my head towards Karl, the fabric pulled tight across my chest as he twisted harder, "You're the one that tried to force yourself on me, so you got every bit of injury you deserved."

Without giving him time to respond, I swiftly yanked down the lever and pulled the door open. Karl kept his hold on my shirt, slightly pulling me closer to him as we both looked up at the naga staring down at us.

The neutral look on Oso's face reminded me of the day I came back from the hospital, his red-and-black eyes shifting into a glare that clearly displayed what he thought of what he saw.

"Oso, you surprised me," I violently tugged down at the hem of my shirt, intending to rip out the fabric from Karl's scared hand, "Mind if I come in for a moment?"

His eyes switched from the man to me before flicking over towards the three suited men behind us. Without saying anything, Oso looked back to me and pulled me into his enclosure by my upper arm, his hold gentle but strong enough to pull me free from Karl. He didn't let go until we were deep within the room.

"Tell me."

"Calmine and the two others want to physically inspect your wounds, Karl doesn't want you to get near him," I quickly explained in a hushed whisper, "Bear with them...please..."

The harsh look in his eyes softened as I begged, his neutral mask falling away underneath a smirk, "For a price, I'll put up with anything they do to me that doesn't involve injury."

I gave a sigh, looking at him expectantly.

"You'll pay for it on the island," The smirk widened before he turned to face the four men that staggered through the thick underbrush, the footpath not wide enough for all of them at the same time, "Hello there! Sorry to take

away (y/n) if you needed her. I just had a small complaint about the heating lamp."

"What was wrong with it?" Karl raised an eyebrow skeptically, standing a few feet behind the wall of pressed suits.

"It was just a little too cold in here last night," Oso rubbed his hands on his upper arms, trying to circulate some blood, "She said she'd take care of it, so it's not that big of an issue any more. Did you guys need something from me?"

"Would you turn around?" The shorter man wagged a finger in a circle.

"Like this?" The naga turned to face the black wall, revealing his back to the men. I stayed right beside him to act as his eyes if they tried something.

The men seemed to be satisfied with that, taking a few steps closer until they were almost in arms reach of the naga, squinting their eyes to inspect the damage done to his skin and scales from the capture. I watched their movements carefully, seeing that the damage that I saw in the cargo container had mostly healed up and left only a few scales cracked, if not a little dented. Another shedding cycle or two would remove that completely.

"This red-headed krait looks to be in sufficient enough health," The taller man looked towards Calmine, "The damage that you had reported seemed to be a lot worse."

"Y'all have Ms. (Y/n) tah thank for tha'," Calmine nodded towards me, "She was very cautious about takin' care of them while the creatures were here, an' I begged for her tah be gentle while the nagas were sheddin' out."

Oso and I glanced at each other, our faces almost making the same expression.

"If she's such a good caretaker of these things, then perhaps we may have to think about adding a revision to the contract," The smaller man coughed into his handkerchief before tucking it back into the breast pocket, "If

Calmine is willing to release you from his payroll, then would you consider an offer to travel with your charges to New York?"

"It would be an honor, but you'd need to convince him to let me go first," I offered a playful laugh that started the others, my fists clenched tightly behind my back. My ears picked up the slight movement from Oso, his head moving back to the black window as his eyes narrowed a little. He must've heard the closing chime, "As for now, I need to make sure that the nagas settle down for the night before the lights are turned off and I'm allowed to go home."

The round of laughter seemed to offset the business atmosphere for just a little bit.

"Of course," The tall man nodded in agreement, focusing his attention back towards Calmine, "Seriously, Stuart. You have an uncanny ability for finding the rarest creatures on Earth, and the money to hire the best care for them."

The conversation faded as the three businessmen walked past Karl, their voice completely vanishing in the silence of the back area. My colored hues shifted from the foliage to the blond man still standing in the enclosure, narrowing my eyes while I heard Oso turn back around.

"Weren't you the guy that tried to attack (y/n) a few weeks ago?" The naga lowered himself to my height, his arms folding across his chest as a pensive look settled on his face, "Oh, I remember! You're the guy that Jyushi crushed. How are your ribs doing,

softie

?"

"...they're fine," Karl snarled through gritted teeth, "No other damage than just the ribs...though I'm sure you would've preferred me to be dead."

"Of course," A condescending smirk widened on Oso's face, "I hate humans since they're the reason we're here."

"Then why not kill (y/n)? She's the one that dragged you to this place. I'm sure you're more upset with her than anyone else."

"Why would I kill the person keeping me alive in a place that I don't know anything about?" Karl seemed to flinch at the unexpected question, "Sure, I'm mad at her, but she knows it and we have an understanding that keeps her alive in here."

"You mean that you fuck her?" Karl glared at the naga before shifting his glower towards me, his blue eyes icy and cold, "I don't see anything else about her skills or

stature

that would keep her alive."

I took in a breath to rebuke him, but Oso cut me off before I could say anything.

"And if I am? Why would that matter to you?"

Karl's eyes snapped wide as he sucked in a breath through his nose, the nostrils flaring as his lips pressed into a thin line. It took him a few seconds to compose himself before speaking again, "Then she already knows what Calmine wants from her."

His heel dug into the substrate as he turned away, stomping off before I went to insure that I wasn't locked in the enclosure with Oso. Relief washed over my system when I saw that the door was still open and the back area was vacant.

"Did I go too far?" Oso asked from behind, a hand gently pressing against my back where Karl had crumpled up the shirt as his fingers smoothed it out.

"Maybe?" I looked over my shoulder at him, "I mean, it's not like it really matters at this point. It took

me

by surprise."

I felt his hand shift from my back to the front of my waist, hooking me close to his chest as he lay his chin on my right shoulder, "Did you want it to be true?"

Fighting down the blush, I pushed him away from me as Oso let out a loud laugh, not offering any kind of resistance to the rejection. Taking a few steps out of the enclosure, I pressed my hands against my cheeks and took a breath before turning to face him while lowering my hands.

"I'll open the door again in two hours...and I'll think about it."

"All right," Oso's red-and-black eyes closed slightly as the coy smirk returned to his lips, closing the door and leaving me in silence.

I double checked the e-mail account, finding a confirmation from Jeff that everything was still on schedule with a clear flight path to Hawaii for a refueling. There was a small depression forming in the Pacific Ocean, but it wasn't projected to form into anything big by the time the helicopter would take off from Hawaii. With the confirmation, I started the process to completely reset the laptop and remove anything that I put on it. It would be a blank slate for whoever found it, leaving no trace of my digital prints.

I threw my duffel bag with my freshly cleaned clothes and field journal onto the prep table, careful to not jostle the hidden knives in their rudimentary sleeves. Glancing over at the fridge, I opened the doors to see some of my smaller snacks and water bottles, stuffing two bottles into the nearly full duffle bag while slowly chowing down on the remaining three fruit cups. It was probably going to be my last meal for a while.

My mind ran wild with things that could still go wrong. There may be too many employees left when the helicopter landed, the security officer may not be the female I was hoping for, or one of the nagas could be hurt leaving. Too many negative outcomes.

I grabbed the keycard from my bag and shook my head from side to side, gathering myself before walking down the guarded doorway. Swiping the

keycard and offering a friendly wave towards the booth, I took a look down the left branch of the hallway as if to see something down the hall and gazed over my shoulder into the open door of the security booth.

It was the female.

Swinging towards the supply room, I gave a wave and nod towards one of the maintenance guys who was heading out, holding the door open for me as I stepped inside. I needed something inconspicuous, something that wouldn't be missed for the next two hours...and something that was heavy enough to knock someone out.

Lifting a hefty pipe wrench, I set it down as I looked over the tools on display, taking care to avoid the more dangerous ones such as a hammer or saw. It wasn't my intention to kill a human tonight...only to knock them out long enough for us to be long gone.

Bypassing the larger wrenches, I picked up what looked to be a large clamping tool before moving towards some piping and reaching for cinches and a small bit of waterproof tarping that I recognized from the nagas' water features. With the armful of material, repairing implements, and chosen tool, I let myself back through the security checkpoint while saying there was a small emergency tear in one of the enclosures.

The officer called out to let her know if she needed to call someone.

I tried to wave away the question, lifting a thumb to reassure her.

Gently laying out the things on the prep table, I sighed and went to Kara's enclosure, knowing that his soaking pool was not in view of the cameras and would give me an excuse for not being seen on the feed.

"(Y/n), I wasn't expecting you to come back so soon," Kara raised his head from the embankment, his entire body completely submerged, "Is something the matter?"

"No, I'm just using you as an excuse," I settled into a sitting position on the opposite side so we could face each other without forcing the other to

move.

"Ah..." A look of understanding passed his face before he rested the back of his head against the makeshift 'pillow' of dead leaves and substrate, "It'll be soon, then."

"Yeah..."

"Do you want to talk to pass the time?"

"We can if that doesn't bother you," I dipped a finger into the warm water, looking beyond the surface to see that Kara's normally teal-blue scales had completely dulled. He was a day or two away from shedding.

"Of course it doesn't bother me," He laughed a little, "Oso must've been mad, then..."

I looked up in surprise before realizing that he was taking in the scents that clung to me, "Yeah, Oso was mad about the visitors, but I think I managed to calm him down."

"He doesn't think that it's going to work."

"Oso? He said that he trusted me..." My eyebrows knitted together in sorrow.

"Trust doesn't really mean complete belief," Kara sighed, "At least...not for Oso. I can understand where he's coming from, though. I'm the second eldest and share almost as much responsibility for our little family of 'monsters'. I should've been aware that something was going on, but my guard was completely down on the island."

"Do you think that this will work?"

"I think that you've done everything you can to ensure that it happens," His copper eyes met mine, "There's still the chance that those who will be our ride won't show up on time, or even at all. I don't want to think about that, so I don't...but Oso does."

"So, you're an optimist while he's a pessimist?"

"I prefer to believe what I've been told, even if it's not the complete truth. If the person talking to me doesn't want me to know stuff, then I won't chase it down," He closed his eyes as he relaxed his neck again, "Oso wants to know everything so he can plan for inevitabilities, so he knows how to react when something happens. I can't imagine what being in here has done to him..."

"He...was in really rough shape after the raid," I closed my eyes as the memory replayed in my head, "I was worried that he was starting to lose himself."

Silence filled the enclosure before I heard the sloshing of water, opening my eyes to see Kara moving towards me. I watched as he settled himself near me, cradling his chin on both palms while resting his elbows on the shoreline.

"How long have we been here?"

"It's been close to three months, I think," I hesitantly reached out before running my fingers through his slightly damp hair, admiring the blue tint that matched the normal color of his scales, "It feels like it's been much longer, though, doesn't it?"

"We've never really kept track of time as we just follow our instincts," Kara leaned into my hand, my fingertips brushing against his scalp, "If it's been a few 'months', then the island will be heading into its wet season soon."

"Anything I need to know about the wet season?"

"Not especially. If our nests are still intact, then you'll be able to stay with one of us during a storm."

"Nests, huh? Looking to impress some females?" I raised an eyebrow playfully as my lips pulled back into a smile.

"They're more of a home than a nest, I guess," Kara laughed again before pulling himself a little more out of the water, one of his hands resting on my knee, "We figured that we may as well get comfortable since we couldn't find any girls there."

"Ah, a true bachelor pad."

"What's that?" He cocked his head towards me in curiosity.

"That's what humans call the home of a single male, someone who's not attached to someone else through any kind of relationship."

"Then yes, we have bachelor pads on the island," The proud smile Kara gave made me laugh, the noise fading to eventual silence. The moment stretched as we just sat and enjoyed the other's company, only breaking when Kara pulled away from my hand on his head.

"You should check to make sure that we don't miss our ride."

"Right," I blinked a few times to clear my mind as I stood up, my body feeling sore from sitting in the same position for a while. Peeking through the door to look at the wall clock, I saw the time that I was hoping for.

8 p.m.

Leaving Kara's door open slightly, I took the clamping tool in my hand and steeled myself as I walked down the hall, my heart racing like crazy in my chest as I swiped the keycard against the keypad. The door clicked open and I walked the same path as before, peeking into the guard shack to see the female security officer leaning over the desk and staring down at her phone. Her back was to me and the video playing sounded like it was some kind of intense board game with some people shouting their disbelief at some kind of result.

Holding my breath, I took a step into the office and held out the tool as far as my dominant hand would hold it. I feared that my heartbeat would give my position away, slowly creeping towards her swivel chair until I was within a comfortable striking range. With a small backswing, I swung the

clamping tool down towards her head, the bulbous arm of the metal tool colliding against the soft spot of her temple.

Chapter 33

(Video for reference to those that don't how big a Mil Mi-26 actually is.)

I stared down at the limp body of the female security officer, the same one who was kind enough to give me a keycard and the one that allowed me to have access to the supply room in the first place.

"I'm sorry...I'm so sorry...!" I moved her aside and quickly dug out the set of keys labelled as 'FIRE KEY', shoving the drawer back into the desk and rushing to the fire exit. My hands were shaking too much, adrenaline mixed with regret at my actions making it hard for the key to slide into the keyhole, but after a small struggle, the metal implement slid home and I was able to turn it.

I had the right key.

Gripping it tightly in my hand, I made sure that no one saw me go back into the back area and slipped the duffle bag strap over my shoulder.

"Guys, now!" I started pulling open the doors to the enclosures, watching the six nagas look at me for further direction before following me down the hallway. I used the keycard to open the double doors, going first to make sure the intersections were still clear before waving them through. Back at the fire exit, I struggled to get the key into place before it turned in the lock, unlocking the heavy fire doors without triggering the alarm.

The night air was cool, but not chilly, and the stars were hard to see through the light pollution of the city surrounding the zoo.

"We need to go that way," I pointed towards the direction that the roads were in, aligning my position to the mental picture of the map I had memorized, "There will probably be a fence or a wall that you'll need to scale, but beyond that are two roads that I talked about."

Tossing the keycard and keyring back into the building before shutting the door, I started to guide the six large nagas through the quiet walkways of the zoo. The entire zoo was devoid of spectators looking at the animals on display, making the feeling unsettling as I picked the more heavily sheltered path and using the surrounding trees as cover.

As we forged through the artificial woods and made it to the edge of the tree line, I glanced around the empty side street to see that there were very few cars still parked in some of the spots while the parking lots beyond the side street were completely empty. There was a large tree that sat between the side street and the parking lot, and it was better cover than nothing. Directing the nagas to head there, I followed them as quickly as I could, surprised at their speed across the pavement. When they made it to the safety of the tree, I was halfway into the side street.

"You're so slow...(y/n)!" I heard Jyushi laugh a little before a hand grabbed my wrist, the laugh turning into a shout. The hand pulled back on my wrist, forcing me to turn around mid-step and fall back onto the pavement, staring up at a sneering Karl.

"Karl...!" I scooted back away from him, mentally urging the nagas to not reveal themselves.

"I thought you were acting strangely in front of Calmine," Karl closed the distance between us and backed me against one of the parked cars scattered in the street, squatting down in front of me with a confident sneer on his lips, "You were thinking of escaping with them?"

"I'm just going home," I tried to move around the car, but his hands pressed against the car on either side of my shoulders, "Let me leave, or I'm calling the cops!"

"That would be digging your own grave, wouldn't it? I thought you were smarter than that," He huffed before looking towards the large tree as a few hisses sounded from it, "At least they know the stakes if they come close."

"I'm taking them back home," I roughly pushed against his shoulders, narrowing my eyes in frustration as he didn't move as much as I was

hoping, "You know what they can do."

"I know what they can do if they're given the chance," Karl's blue eyes lowered to me, his hands moving from the car to my shirt as he gathered the fabric in one of his fists, "They're not going to get it."

He lifted me off of the ground as I struggled to back free from his grip, his attention turning towards the nagas watching from the tree.

"You lot are worth a lot of money, and we'd so hate to lose a big contract that we've just been offered," Karl tightened his grip on my shirt, "I know you're quite fond of this toy of yours, so let's make a deal. Stay here and be shipped off to your new owners tomorrow, and I'll let you fuck her all you want while you're with them."

"Karl!" I cried out in horror and shock, my fingers violently attacking his hand while trying to pry free from his grip. The tree went completely silent of hisses and growls before I noticed a single naga glide forward into the light of the streetlamps, his black and red scales nearly perfect camouflage in the darkness, "Oso...no...!"

The red-haired naga barely glanced at me before stopping against my back, Karl positioning me as a barrier.

"What are your terms exactly?"

"My terms...? You're actually gonna fucking listen to me for once?" The human partially closed his eyes in suspicion before glancing at me, "I want you all to waltz your tails back into your cages and wait for the boss to fly you out. When you're all set up in your new cages, you can have (y/n) back as your fuck toy."

"Ah, sorry," Oso shook his head a little before leaning in, his torso lowering over my body, "You're using too many words that I don't know. Say it in more simple terms, human."

Karl's lips opened in a twisted sneer before he yelled out in pain, a hand clamping down over his mouth while a blue-haired head suddenly bit down

on his exposed shoulder. My vision was blocked by something cold before I was pulled out of Karl's grip, my form lifted up and taken somewhere.

"Oso, what's going on?" I tried to shake the thing from my eyes, putting my hands on it to feel individual fingers that marked it as a hand, "What did Kara just do?!"

"Looks like we can add another death to my running tally," Oso laughed a little, "What does that make it...five?"

"Oso, stop," I pulled his hand off of my eyes, shooting up a glare to see him return the glare right back at me.

"I gave him an offer that he could have his life if he left yours alone," His glare shifted into a softer look before I found myself being passed to Jyushi, his arms still warm from the heating lamp, "I just wanted to tighten up the loose end."

"But Kara...!" I looked to see Kara following Oso with a gentle smile on his face, the blue scales a little easier to see in the faint moonlight than the black-and-red ones.

"I'm not hurt, (y/n)," He looked up at me, "I'm honored that the first chance to keep you safe fell to me."

"You said that we need to cross two streets," Oso continued as if nothing had happened, "Are those the streets over there?"

My mind still reeling from what just happened, I blankly stared towards the last two obstacles standing between the nagas and the helicopter before nodding.

"Great! Let's keep an eye out for those vehicles (y/n) warned us about and get to the other side," Oso commanded before leading his brothers through the empty parking lot and swiftly crossing the first empty road. Ducking through the stretch of partial desert land between the roads, he silently motioned for them to stay still, waiting for a car to pass on the second road before crossing it.

"(Y/n), are you okay?" Jyushi pressed his forehead to my cheek, lowering his head to look at me when he finished crossing the second road. I tried to gather my thoughts, placing a trembling hand on his cheek and holding his head close to mine.

In just fifteen minutes, maybe less...I had assaulted a security officer and Kara had killed the person that had tried to rape me. Should I have cared? Probably not because I wasn't going to be living in human civilization anymore...but the images still burned in my head.

"(Y/n)...?" Jyushi's voice penetrated the noise in my head, making me look over at him as his orange eyes filled with worry, "Where do we go now?"

My colored hues widened in realization. I didn't have time to freak out right now...we still weren't in the clear.

I looked around the dark field to see Oso, Kara, Choro, Ichi, and Todo waiting nearby for further directions, motioning for Jyushi to put me down.

"We head northwest where there will be a field cleared for aircraft to sit on. We're looking for a large helicopter with its lights still on," Finding my mental marker where we were, I started walking in the correct direction, "I want you to remain out of sight until I'm sure that you're clear to go to the helicopter."

"What about you?" Choro asked from my left.

"I'll come with you, if that's what you all want."

"And will it take us home from here?" Todo sounded on my right.

"There's one stop that it'll need to take to refuel, but after that stop, it's a one-way trip to your island," I stopped speaking before looking over at Oso, searching for his eyes in the darkness, "You can't kill these people...you can't let anyone kill these people."

He was silent for a moment, holding my stare before I heard him huff out a sigh, "I save you twice and I'm instantly a blood-thirsty killer in your

eyes..."

"Killing four people in one night is not what I would call 'saving me', Oso," My fist clenched as I stopped moving, seeing him move forward without me for a few feet, "I'll let you get away with what Kara did to Karl, but I don't forgive the kind of action you took. They would've been dealt with appropriately in their own time, and you-"

"I don't care about what kind of system that you humans have to punish others that did something wrong," Oso reared back towards me, "We saw what they did to you and I told Choro and Jyushi to finish the job!"

Silence fell over the field as the new information crashed over me, the mentioned nagas shifting a little in discomfort before I shook my head to clear my thoughts. I had figured that Choro and Jyushi had done something that night, considering how hesitant they were about telling me what happened afterwards...but I could imagine how it may have unfolded.

After I was knocked out, Ichi went to Oso and released both Choro and Jyushi while the people that attacked him were beating me up. It would explain the sudden silence as I woke up and the lack of bodies when I was taken from the building...

A natural form of justice in the nagas minds, I guessed...and it wouldn't do me any good to get mad at them for it. Especially not now, since we were running away from human civilization.

"You could've just told me the truth from the beginning," I commented as I walked past Oso, letting out a heavy sigh as I closed my eyes for a moment, "Instead of letting me harbor this fear of you, Oso."

"That would take away the fun of teasing you, though," Oso almost pouted.

"Wait, you told her that you killed them?" Kara sounded partially impressed, "You can't kill anything larger than a cub because you get scared of it attacking you back!"

"And you call yourself the oldest," Choro scoffed nearby.

"Like you're both any better!" Oso snapped, "(Y/n), did you know that Kara has a fear of heights and Choro had knocked himself out no less than four times by accidentally biting himself?"

"Ahh! No, shut up!" Choro and Kara cried out, whimpering like their most vulnerable secrets had been exposed.

"You've bitten yourself, too, idiot," Todo gave a soft laugh, the sound partially muffled like he was pressing a hand over his mouth.

"Todo got stuck eating his own tail!" Jyushi exclaimed, a hearty guffaw interwoven in his words while Todo tried to shut him up.

A smile settled on my lips as the naga siblings started to loosen up a little as the large helicopter appeared behind the hill we traversed, listening to their friendly banter and taking verbal jabs at each other's weaknesses or flaws.

The helicopter was the same one that I had asked for on Jeff's website, the flight lights still on and the cargo bay wide open. The interior lights illuminated the nearby field, and I could see three people standing in the vicinity of the heli, two in the cargo bay with the third sitting on the ramp trying to light a cigarette.

"Is that...?" Ichi asked quietly.

"Yeah...If I wave with one arm, it means run. If I wave with two, it's safe," I adjusted the duffle bag on my shoulder and motioned for them to stay behind. There wasn't any noise of acknowledgement, but the nagas stayed back while I continued forward, the light from the cargo bay spilling onto the ground and up my legs as I came closer.

"Hey, civvie," The person sitting on the ramp called out as I came within twenty feet of him, the lit cigarette pinched between his two first fingers on his left hand, "It's a little late to come sightsee the air field, isn't it?"

"I believe that you're my ride home," I couldn't remember any kind of codeword that Jeff may have told me to say, "Well, for me and six others."

"...shit," He grunted as he stood up, taking a long drag from the cigarette before flicking it to the ramp and crushing it with the toe of his boot, "Thought you'd come by a little later when the city was asleep, Ms. (L/n). I'm Grant, and I'll be your co-pilot today. Lottie's in the cockpit waiting for everything to be closed up before takeoff. Jack is the navigator, Rebecca is the communications officer, Steve's the flight engineer, and Stacy is the accompanying vet for your six friends."

Grant looked behind me before moving into the helicopter, shouting out that they needed the engine warmed up. When one of the other people in the cargo area looked towards me, they came closer and I realized that they were female.

"Where are they? In the bag?"

"And you are...?" I raised an eyebrow, turning away so I was between her and my bag.

"Dr. Stacy Williams," She held out a hand, which I shook tentatively, "I'm here to make sure that the boys are calm on the ride and are healthy throughout the trip."

Much better than chaining them into cargo containers completely knocked out...

"No, they're not in the bag. They're too big," I faced where I thought they'd be hiding and waved both of my arms above my head. I could hear her gasp as the nagas began to emerge from the darkness, the light catching their colored scales, "There's a reason why I needed the larger helicopter."

"Are we good to-" Oso was cut off by the starting whine of the helicopter engines, most of the nagas looking upwards.

"Yeah, come on board!" A new voice yelled out from the cargo area, a man waving his hand for us to all enter the helicopter, "We've got clearance!"

"Come on," I walked into the spacious cargo area, hearing the engine kick over to a higher gear as the turbine began to twist the rotors. The nagas

cautiously slid over the loading ramp before tucking in deeper, curling around where I chose to stand. The man that yelled out at us moved around the tight coils and closed up the ramp, the outside wind from the rotors cutting off as the loading hatch completely sealed.

"Ladies and gents," He called out as he moved past the ball of nagas once more, "It'll be a little bit bumpy on the takeoff, but smooth sailing after that. We won't be serving drinks or food as an in-flight service, and your medical needs can be taken care of by Stacy. If you need to move about the cabin," He stood by the door that divided the cargo area from the personnel stations, "Please let us know before you do so our pilots can compensate."

"Is it bad to move in here?" Kara whispered as quietly as he could above the din.

"Not really for humans, but since you guys are...almost three to four times heavier than us, the pilots will be able to feel your movement while they fly. Helicopters need balance to stay in the air, and a sudden shift in weight without warning could be bad," I shook my head a little, "I know it's much smaller than your previous rooms, but please bear with it for a little longer."

"If you're not able to handle it, I can give you something that will put your mind at ease," Stacy piped up as she moved to sit in one of the few folding chairs welded into the frame of the helicopter, "Just say the word and I'll give it to you."

"I...may need it," Choro cautiously held up his hand, "As long as it doesn't hurt."

"I'll make it as painless as possible," Stacy was up on her feet and took a few things out of a bag she had stowed in a side bin. Quickly preparing the drug, she motioned for me to sit next to Choro for comfort and I rubbed his back while she swiftly stuck his extended arm with a needle. He slightly flinched against me before the weight in his torso shifted onto me fully, pinning me down on top of his and Kara's coils with Choro peacefully knocked out on my lap.

"How long will it last?"

"It'll last until we land for refueling, so about seven or eight hours," Stacy glanced over at my new position, stifling a laugh, "In fact, this is probably a good time to grab some sleep if you need it."

"That sounds like a good idea..." I stifled a yawn before leaning back into Kara's coils, feeling him shift a little to create a more comfortable place to lay for me as his human half turned around to cradle Choro and myself in his hold, "...Kara...?"

"Sleep, little flower," He pressed his cheek to mine, "We'll keep you safe."

Chapter 34

I opened my eyes slowly to see an army tan paint color covering the ceiling and support structure of the room I was in. There was a low humming noise reverberating all around, causing a small headache to form as I sat up from the bed I was laying on.

"...not yet..." A voice whined out sleepily behind me as I was pulled back down into a lying position, a tightness wrapping around my waist while someone cradled around my body. I glanced down tiredly at the arms keeping me on the bed, seeing pale skin with splotches of white and yellow dotted throughout the length of the limb.

Yellow...?

I yawned before my mind snapped awake,

Jyushi!

I twisted around to see Jyushi laying on top of Kara, his lower half twisted in all kinds of directions within the naga ball. They were all sleeping peacefully, with Jyushi's tail holding Kara, Choro, and Ichi together while Oso and Todo remained separate but still safely within the pile. I lay my hands over Jyushi's arms, cautiously pulling them away from me and pushing myself off of the pile.

"You didn't get much sleep," I heard a female voice call out, "We're only two hours into the flight."

"Two...? It feels like I slept for much longer than that..." I rubbed my tired eyes with the heels of my hands, stifling a yawn as much as I could before my mouth opened wider, "Did any of the others ask for the tranquilizer?"

"Not at all. They just curled around you after you passed out and fell asleep on their own," I recognized the voice belonging to the vet, opening my eyes to see her hold a cup up to her lips as she watched me, "I've got some coffee

in a thermos if you need some. I can't guarantee that it'll taste the same at this altitude, though."

"No, I'll be okay," I glanced back at the tangled ball of nagas, "It's been a harrowing few months...so if I fall asleep, I'd like to have it without interruption."

"Understandable," Stacy gave a nod, lowering the cup of coffee from her lips and holding it on top of her knee, "You know, when Jeff had asked me to come on this flight, I almost took it as a joke."

"I can understand why," I moved away from the sleeping nagas to take a seat near her, pulling down the seat of the welded bulkhead chair and getting as comfortable as I could.

"The one that is the most injured...Oso, was that his name?" She looked at me as I gave an affirmative nod, "I had tried to assess his injuries after you went to sleep, but he refused to let me touch him. The lavender corn...Ichi, I think...would I be able to look at the wound on his waist when he wakes up?"

"That depends on what they're comfortable with," I rested my chin on my palm, leaning forward until the elbow connected to my raised knee, "Oso's had those wounds the entire time we were there, but they've been healing slowly with time. He's already shed out once and that took care of the more damaged scales. Ichi...I'm not medically trained, but it didn't seem like the wound was getting worse when I was allowed to see it more closely. I can ask him to let you take a look, but I can't guarantee he'll agree."

"That's all right. I'm not gonna force it to happen," She laughed a little, taking another sip of coffee before bringing a finger up and rubbing the rim of the cup, "I feel like I have to congratulate you for hanging in there. We weren't told much other than where to go, who we were picking up, and what our destination was, but when we found out that we were being hired to rescue people from a bad situation, we started to do research to figure out what was going on."

I stiffened as she spoke, partially wondering if she wasn't someone Calmine had hired to tail us.

"Rebecca was the first to find out about you and the nagas, and found out that several forums had been talking about you guys. One caught her attention and she couldn't do anything other than watch as a small group planned to free the nagas," Stacy sighed as her finger danced along the edge of the cup, "Another forum board had people posting pictures of what the nagas were doing each day, and when the caretaker had suddenly changed from you to someone else, we feared the worst. Jeff got your e-mail a few days later and scrambled the flight."

"You were following what happened?" I leaned back into the hull of the helicopter, feeling the hum of the turbines and engines rumble through the metal.

"As people posted them, yeah. There were theories of what the nagas actually were, skeptics and believers fighting over their existence and breaking down each picture pixel by pixel. Some groups formed within the forums to keep them out of human hands, claiming that we would taint what they were, while others were spouting nonsense about some extremist mindset that caught on. When you came back, the forums jumped back to life as there were close up pictures of your wounds, and asking the small group if they had failed. Since they never responded to the targeted questions, people began to suspect that you had them killed."

I trailed my fingers lightly over my neck before reaching up and touching the bottom of the eyepatch, a frown pulling the corners of my lips down, "No...one of them had attacked Ichi with a knife and I defended him."

"Then the wound...?"

I nodded my answer to her question. She remained silent for a few moments before speaking again.

"I hate people like Calmine."

I shifted my gaze towards Stacy, watching as her eyebrows furrowed in disappointment.

"There's always the correct way to handle new discoveries, the morally gray way, and the absolute wrong way," Her dark green eyes met mine and held my gaze, "Calmine and his ilk always choose the wrong way because money is always a driving factor."

Stacy finished off her cup of coffee before continuing, "I used to work for an animal hospital that put money before patients, and I started my own clinic as soon as I could afford it. Seeing creatures that can't fight off what they're going through is hard, but seeing sentient creatures like them get taken advantage of is agony to watch. It's part of why I volunteered to be on the crew, despite not having much experience with reptiles."

My harsh gaze softened as I recognized what she was talking about, knowing that it was similar to how I felt about the nagas' imprisonment. I wondered briefly if we would've been friends had we known each other before this...

"I'm happy that I could get them out when I did...they were slated to be sold to a private animal collector Saturday," I shifted my eyes back towards the naga ball, "Oso was the one to warn me about it...in his own way."

"How did he know about it?"

"Excellent hearing."

I paused as I heard a voice join mine in answering, seeing movement within the ball as Oso pulled himself up and crept forward slowly before stopping at the edge of the pile closest to Stacy and myself. I waved a hand in a 'told you so' manner towards him as I looked back over at Stacy.

"You could keep sleeping, Oso," I turned towards him, seeing his black-and-red eyes take in his surroundings, "Or Stacy could give you that stuff to help you stay asleep."

"Don't need it," His answer was brief, "Can't really sleep here with the noise."

"Unfortunately, it can't be turned off until we land to fuel up," Stacy gave him an apologetic smile as he inspected her side of the helicopter, "There wasn't much chance to introduce myself, but I'm Dr. Stacy and I'm someone that can help ease any pain you could feel during the trip."

"Like those men?" Oso's eyes hardened as I realized what he was talking about.

"No, not like the ones that put you in the container," I quickly interjected, making him look at me, "You saw how she gives the sleeping medicine. There's no guns, relatively no pain, and you're in an open area where we can make sure that you're taken care of."

"No masks, either."

"Of course not. We're not here to make you obey us," Stacy picked up what he was talking about, not moving from her seat as she took over the conversation, "We know that you're just wanting to go home, and we're happy to help you get there. My job is to make sure you make it there safely without restraining you. You've all had enough containment in your lives."

Oso remained silent as he reached over to Choro, gently laying the back of his hand against the green mamba's neck and holding it there for a moment before pulling away. I caught the gentle look on his face as he realized that Choro was still alive, just in a deep sleep.

"You mentioned earlier that you wanted to tend to my injuries."

"You were awake for that long?" I raised an eyebrow as he mentioned the topic earlier in the conversation I had with Stacy.

"You were too loud," Oso tilted his head towards me, a smirk on his lips.

"If you're not against it, I'd just like to make sure that everything is healing well," Stacy stood up, looking around the cargo area before settled her eyes

on a spot that was open enough for her to examine Oso, "I'll let the pilots know of the movement shift and then we can start."

He simply nodded before she ducked into the personnel area, shifting his gaze to me when Stacy disappeared from view.

"You...(Y/n), thanks."

I stilled at the words, not expecting anything other than a jab or something sarcastic, "You're welcome...what did I do now?"

"Well, we're not in cages, are we?" He looked around the area to reiterate his point, "As far as I'm concerned, being in here for a little while isn't as terrible as being put into individual rooms to be gawked at for the rest of our lives."

"No, I suppose it's not," I stood up and moved closer to Oso, his eyes glued to mine as I entered his reach, "How about those debts of mine?"

"Most of them will be erased when my brothers and I are safely on the island again," He slightly closed his eyes, "Why do you ask...?"

"I ask because I'm tired of having a debt with you. I've done everything I could've possibly done right, so I'm itching to not be held responsible for my mistake anymore."

His torso shifted as he reached out with his left hand, fingers briefly touching my right arm before travelling up to settle on the eyepatch as his thumb hooked underneath it, pulling it upwards gently to reveal my damaged eye to the light. I winced a little at the sensitivity before Oso lowered the patch back over my eye.

"Like Stacy was saying, most of the fault lays with that Calmine guy," His fingers trailed down my cheek and neck, hovering down my arm and gently curled around my own fingers before pulling away as Stacy walked back into the cargo area, "No one's blaming you for what happened anymore, (y/n). It's just you holding it against yourself."

"Lottie and Grant said you're clear to move a little, Oso," The vet leaned down towards the bin from before, pulling out a bag and opening up one of the zippers to pull out a stethoscope and tweezers. She slung the stethoscope behind her neck and directed Oso to move into an area where she could move about him more freely without bothering the other nagas. I quickly sat back down when I felt the helicopter shift a little as Oso moved, looking back to the naga pile to see that the rest of the brothers were still sleeping.

"Did you need me to do anything?"

"Other than stand there, not really," Stacy placed the buds of the stethoscope in her ears as she began to listen to his breathing, moving the tool's diaphragm along his chest until she reached near his midsection, "You've got quite a large pair of lungs, Oso."

He hummed as she pulled the earpieces out before moving down towards his waist, her eyes focused on the various scales that were still damaged from the beating on the landing area on the island. Oso watched her carefully as Stacy moved around him in a slow circle, not reaching out to touch him once.

"Most of what I see is really superficial," She told him as she straightened back up, "There's only one problem that I can see is a small area near your back that looks to have an irritation."

I moved to look where she was pointing, seeing the small red lesions clustered around one of the upper damaged scales resting just beneath Oso's waistline. They looked small enough to not fret over them, but we were heading towards a remote location with no access to any kind of healthcare. Stacy walked back towards her medical bag, digging through a smaller pouch on the side and bringing out a small tube full of some kind of cream. The tube went back into the bag, a dissatisfied look on the vet's face before she pulled another tube as a smile erased the frustration.

"You'll need to apply this twice a day for the next week, (y/n), but it'll help his skin calm down from the irritation," She looked back towards Oso as she came closer, "May I show her how to apply it on you?"

"Go ahead," His eyes followed her until she was out of his visual range. I noticed the tip of his tail flick from side to side a little, curling up before relaxing and lightly hitting the deck of the cargo area.

"Hang in there..." I rested a hand on his back as I leaned over to watch what Stacy was doing, hoping that the small touch was enough to lessen his stress. She swiftly opened the tube cap and peeled off the small metal seal, squeezing a dot onto the pad of her middle finger and lightly swiping the digit over the irritated spot. She rubbed the cream over the scales and into the skin between them, gently moving her finger in circles until most of the cream had been massaged into the skin.

"That's it," She pulled her hand away quickly, capping the tube and handing it to me, "Twice a day for the next week."

"Got it," I nodded as I looked over her handiwork, looking back up at Oso and catching his eye, "Think you can handle that from me?"

His cheeks reddened slightly and he partially turned his head away from me, "Sure..."

"Your breathing sounds comparable to a human's, Oso, so I'm going to give you an all-clear for your respiratory health," Stacy tucked the stethoscope back into her bag, "Your hearts sounded strong as well, and there weren't any strange sounds that I could gather from your upper intestines."

She held up a thumb towards him, "Clean bill of health from me."

"Hold on, 'hearts'?" I raised an eyebrow.

"Yeah, two of them," Stacy nodded, "One in the upper torso and another sounding a little further down, probably near where our knees or ankles would be. It would make sense to have multiple hearts for such a large body, that way one heart wouldn't be overtaxed for the entire length of him. It also explains why his lungs are so large, too. Gonna need a lot of oxygen to push through the long network of veins."

"When were you gonna mention that little factoid about yourself?" I turned to look at Oso over my shoulder.

"You don't have two hearts?" He raised an eyebrow in return, "Humans are more weird than I originally thought."

"Well...one patient down and one other to go, if he's willing as well," Stacy looked towards the naga pile, seeing all of them still asleep, "It'll be later, though. I'm not going to wake them up. Oh, Oso. We're done, so you can move back to your family."

He nodded before carefully maneuvering his way onto the pile as Stacy disappeared back into the personnel area, probably to tell the pilots the examination was over. I gave him a soft smile as he shifted his gaze towards me, finding a place to hunker down that wouldn't let him slide off the ball. The helicopter shifted unexpectedly, causing me to almost lose my balance before I could sit down.

A hand shot out from the naga pile and grabbed my own, dragging me over before an arm tucked around my waist. Another arm wrapped around my shoulders as a head nestled into the crook of my neck and shoulder, seeing the familiar white-and-yellow hair of Jyushi fall forward as the helicopter hit an empty pocket of air and dropped a little. It quickly righted itself and the flight smoothed out.

I leaned my head against Jyushi's, feeling him start to purr against my back as his breath caressed my cheek, "I promised that I wouldn't let you fall...never ever."

Chapter 35

I didn't remember falling back asleep, but when I woke up, I felt like I was being crushed. An uncomfortable tightness had wrapped itself around my legs and torso, squeezing my nerves every so often like a wave was washing over me. Gritting my teeth and opening my eyes slightly, I couldn't see anything but darkness but my ears picked up a soft hissing sound.

"Guys...?"

"(Y/n)?" I heard Stacy call out from somewhere beyond the naga pile that had somehow encapsulated me, "We've been on the ground for a little while, waiting for the fuel truck to come to us."

I reached out with both hands and felt the smooth underside of a tail hovering right above my head, tracing up the sides with my hands and feeling humid air just past the tail. Scales shifted and the tail was pulled away from my face, a pair of hands hooking underneath my arms and lifting me out of the naga ball. A flashlight clicked on and revealed the darkened cargo area, the source of the light coming from where I had remembered Stacy was sitting.

"Lights out for a reason?" I adjusted my clothing after my feet touched the floor of the area, looking up behind me to see Choro's face in the edge of the flashlight beam and giving him an appreciative smile.

"We don't really want anyone to get curious about the cargo," Stacy pointed the flashlight away from the nagas, sweeping it over the back of the cargo area as if she was inspecting the raised ramp.

"We landed about ten minutes ago, and fuel's twenty minutes out," I heard Grant call out from the personnel area, stepping through the doorway into the cargo bay and starting to open the side door, "I'd suggest waiting to give the nagas some stretching time after the fuel truck leaves. We're not on a strict schedule, now that we've landed here."

"Do you know what time it is?" I carefully made my way over as Grant opened the side door, looking out into the dark night sky that was full of stars.

"Locally, it's just about one in the morning. The wonders of timezones is a beautiful thing," He laughed as he kicked out the collapsible stairs, stepping down to the ground and looking up at the sky, "Took us just over eight-and-a-half hours to get here."

I watched as he took out a cigarette and lit it as he placed the butt into his mouth, the end blazing with a bright orange color as he flicked a lighter to life. Glancing over my shoulder, I could barely make out six pairs of eyes carefully watching me from the darkness of the cargo bay as Stacy switched the flashlight off.

"Can you guys wait another twenty minutes?" Striding back to them, I tried to meet their eyes in the dark, "After the fuel truck leaves, then you guys can go out and stretch."

"That sounds fine..." One of the nagas ducked away, his voice identifying him as Oso, "I can barely feel my tail..."

"Were the vibrations too much?" Stacy asked quickly, her voice coming closer as she emerged from the dark area.

Oso didn't respond, but Jyushi filled in his silence.

"My tail's numb, too!" He laughed out before Stacy turned the flashlight back on and made her way towards the reticulated naga, asking shorter questions to make sure that he was feeling healthy otherwise. After finding out that the numbness more than likely came from the engines reverberating through the floor, Stacy apologized and asked them to bear with it for one more flight. There wasn't a large enough tarp that had enough padding to keep them from feeling the vibrations, but the nagas seemed to agree amongst themselves on some kind of solution.

Twenty minutes passed faster than I thought it would, finding myself enraptured by the stars overhead. They looked a bit different than what I would've seen in San Diego, but we were under a different part of the sky. It would've been strange if it looked the same.

Leaving the flight crew to deal with the people with the fuel truck, I watched as the tanker hooked up to the helicopter and started to fill it up. I sat with my back against the closed ramp, listening to the chatter happening outside between both crews.

Laughter picked up before the volume died down, the conversation carrying to different topics that were along the lines of catching up with local events and news.

"Yeah, the local festival was pretty great to watch this year. You guys missed it by a few days."

"Damn. If we're in the area next year, we'd love to see it for ourselves," I recognized the voice of Grant making pleasant conversation.

"Oh, hey," A heavily accented voice cut in, "Since you guys flew here from San Diego, did you see another Mil on your way out?"

"Can't say that we did from our course. We were only there for a little bit. Why do you ask?" A female answered, probably the pilot or communications officer.

"There's a big ruckus about something going missing, stolen right from a private airfield in a Mil Mi 26," The first strange voice yawned out, "Something about...Aw, shit, what did that air traffic call say?"

"They didn't say what it was, only to be on the lookout for your type of heli," The second voice finished, "Though, it could be anything with a helicopter that size."

"Yeah, it could. She's been with us for a long time, though," I heard Grant speak once more, "Just taking her out over the Pacific for a supply run before heading home."

"You guys must be busy if you're landing this late."

"It was only eight when we left," The female voice laughed, "If we're able to, we'll take off shortly after fueling. Wanna get the cargo there as soon as we can."

"The client didn't want a plane to take it?"

"Plane can't land where we're going. Boss thought it would be easier to just strap down the cargo and haul it in one vehicle, instead of paying two or three different air traffic companies to rent their craft."

"Dude must have money..."

"You could say that."

When the fuel truck drove off after topping off the fuel and finishing the transaction, Grant stepped back into the cargo bay and moved towards the ramp, motioning for me to move away before he pressed one of the buttons near the door. With a loud whir, the ramp unlocked from its closed position and lowered until the top lip rested on the ground.

"We're full up," He stifled a yawn, "Take the next hour or so to stretch, and let us know when you're ready to take off again."

I followed him with my eyes as he moved around the nagas, carefully stepping over the occasional draped tail before he ducked into the personnel area. If I had to guess, the flight crew were probably grabbing some sleep while they were still on the ground.

"All right, you guys can get out and stretch," I called out to the nagas, seeing the ball slowly form into six different figures before the moonlight streaming in from the open ramp caught the dark scales of Choro and Jyushi, the two nagas looking out carefully before sliding down the ramp onto the packed dirt ground. Giving each other a nod, they looked back to others as their forked tongues flicked out of their mouths.

Slowly but surely, the nagas slithered out of the cargo bay and into the small field serving as the landing area, taking a quick look around before rushing towards the jungle brush surrounding the back of the open field. I looked back towards the cargo bay to see one naga still inside.

"Did you not want to stretch..." I made my way closer, seeing the dulled scales in the moonlight, "...Kara?"

"I want to stay here," His voice sounded strained.

"Is your shed bothering you?" I quietly sat down in front of him, looking from the tip of his tail and following his elongated spine up to his head, the tail looped over itself a few times before shifting to the humanoid torso tucked inside the loose coils safely. He seemed to look away from me for a moment before turning his human half away from me completely, "Kara...?"

"They told me to stay here."

"Your brothers?"

He barely nodded, "They said that someone needed to stay here to keep you safe while they explore."

"That's a good thing, isn't it?" I smiled as I shifted closer to the naga, turning a little to lightly lean against a thick section of his tail, "They trust you to keep things safe and secure, even if you're going through a shed."

"That's just the problem, (y/n)," His tail flexed against me, "It's like this even if I'm not shedding. I want to be out there, too."

I frowned a little before standing up and moving to where I could see his face again, "You're the one they wanted to keep me safe, right?"

His eyes didn't move to look at me.

"Then I'm going to look around," I turned towards the ramp of the cargo bay, walking to it with long strides, "You're just going to have to follow me if you need to keep me safe."

"(Y/n), wait...!" Kara bolted up and quickly slithered over to me, his hand catching my wrist and turning me around, "What if my brothers come back to see that we're gone?"

"Then leave a scent for them to read," I smiled up at his worried face, the moonlight catching the dark tones of copper in his eyes, "Let them know that you're with me, and that we will return shortly."

Kara lowered his eyes down to the ground, looking at the dirt underneath my boots and the metal underneath his scales before moving his gaze back up towards me. A confident smile spread across his lips

"All right."

I watched in fascination as Kara rubbed his hand against the frame of the ramp opening, flicking his tongue out lazily before pulling it back between his lips. Giving a nod of satisfaction, he focused back on me and I turned towards the dense foliage where the others had gone, hearing him move next to me with each step I took.

It was a different feeling, seeing Kara 'walk' beside me. He barely moved from side to side like I did, only swaying a little as his tail muscles pushed him forward in a serpentine motion. I never had the chance to really watch the nagas move, either keeping a stationary position with Jyushi or walking up to them while in their enclosures. I was carried on Oso's back on the island, but the urgency of the situation kept me from admiring how he moved around.

"Does it hurt to move?" I looked up at Kara, seeing him hold himself about a head or two higher than me.

"Not really," He glanced down before looking ahead again, "I soaked as much as I could in the room, and since Oso and Jyushi have been ensuring that I don't touch the floor when the helicopter is flying, the vibrations really haven't irritated my skin."

"They...held you off the ground?"

"They were the ones that created the bottom of the pile," His tone softened a little, "Well, for most of the ride they were. We'll be switching off throughout the next part of the flight to make sure that no one is really jostled by the vibrations."

"What about you? Would you be participating in that?" I pushed aside some bushes before stepping into the jungle line, feeling Kara close behind me.

"If I'm able to," Kara laughed a little before coming closer, his arms picking me up and cradling me against his chest, his lower section easily slipping through the foliage, "I doubt it, though. We tend to get protective when someone's in shed..."

"But what about Choro? I thought that Oso and you didn't really make the process easy for him," I repeated what I had heard a while ago from Jyushi.

"He...tends to over prepare for his sheds and gets cranky easily when something doesn't go according to his plan," Kara closed his eyes briefly, a remorseful look crossing his face, "We try to help, but it often makes it worse."

"...and since he was by himself this time, I guess you were all really worried for him," I lifted a branch that almost hit me in the face, "I'm sorry about this..."

"It's really not your fault, (y/n)," Kara lifted the arm underneath my shoulders, pressing his head against mine as it was raised, "The same people that had planned this also brought you to our island. I can't say that what happened was completely bad."

"Careful, sir," I playfully pushed his head away from mine, laughing a little in the silence, "Flattery may be your weapon, but it won't be effective against me."

"Is it considered flattery if it's true?" Kara laughed out before his tone softened in volume, the slope of his nose nestling against my own. His copper eyes caught the sparse moonlight and stared into my own colored

hues, my breath catching in my throat as I saw some deep emotion in his eyes, feeling my cheeks grow hotter.

Before I could say anything, Kara pulled his head away, closing his eyes and taking a deep breath before lowering me to the ground. I stood there as confusion washed over me, seeing him move away a little before moving to catch up to where he was going.

"Kara...?"

"Sorry, (y/n)...I think something must be wrong with me after all," He raised his right hand to rub the back of his head, keeping his face turned away from me.

"What do you mean? Does Stacy need to look you over?" I reached out and lay a hand against his loose skin, feeling the film sitting above his scales about ready to come off. Kara shook his head before lowering his hand and turning towards me.

"Is it wrong...that I want to do more than kiss you?"

Chapter 36

I blinked for a bit before feeling my face flush with surprise. Kara hadn't moved from where he turned around, watching me carefully as I brought my hands up to my face.

"I...uhh..." Words tumbled around in my head, trying to find the right ones to say that wouldn't give him the wrong idea. It wasn't that I was embarrassed about what he said, it was the odd timing of the question that threw me off. Of course I had

those

kinds of thoughts about the nagas, but I wasn't going to...make them happen, "Can...I ask what you mean by 'more'...?"

I met his copper eyes as he moved a little closer to me, his lips parting for a moment before uttering a single word.

"Mating."

My mind reeled at the realization that I had been treating these nagas as innocent creatures, like a parent tiptoeing around their child when asked about the more sensitive topics. Of course they knew what sex was -- it was just a different word for them...and a whole different proc--

I gave my cheeks a firm slap, the noise startling Kara and myself in the silence as I regained my composure. Get them home, then the freaky stuff can happen afterwards. I still needed to be the level-headed human, and that was the person Kara was asking, not the lovesick woman that hadn't had something between her legs in years.

"Mating," I reiterated his word, "I don't consider it wrong to feel that towards me, Kara...in fact I kinda feel that way towards you, towards all of you. But I want to get you home first," I lowered my eyes into a serious gaze.

"Then..." He reached out gently to place a hand on my hip, lowering his head until his lips pressed against my forehead and staying for a long moment before pulling away, "I will wait."

"Thank you, Kara," My lips turned up into a smile before I noticed a layer of chitin along his arm had pulled back, "Did you need help shedding?"

"No, not usually," Kara withdrew his hand, lifting up his arm to inspect it before looking around the area, the moonlight barely catching his flicking tongue, "I can smell water over that way, and I wouldn't mind the company while I remove the skin."

"Sure," I walked next to him as he moved towards where he had detected water. Pushing through a few bushes, we soon came to a small fresh water spring with someone drinking leaning over and drinking from it. Their yellow and black scales were hard to see in the moonlight, but the diamond shapes in his hair were hard to miss.

"Todo."

The pink-spotted naga stopped drinking, looking up before narrowing his eyes towards Kara.

"You were supposed to stay in the helicopter," I didn't miss the miffed tone of Todo's voice.

"I wanted to go exploring, and he accompanied me so I wouldn't get lost," I walked closer near the spring, lowering to a kneeling position and bending close to the water. It didn't smell like salt, so I scooped some up with a cupped hand before bringing it to my lips. The cool water was refreshing, and would definitely help Kara with any stuck shed, "The water's good, Kara."

"Of course it is," The pink-spotted naga scoffed, backing away as if offended by me drinking from the same spring as him, "If it wasn't, then I wouldn't be here."

Kara glanced around the area and found a tree with rough-looking bark, rubbing up against it and making a satisfied noise when the top layer of shed peeled off completely from his arm. Todo gave a disgusted noise in response.

"You're going to do that

here

?" He came closer to my side, lowering himself down the water surface for another drink, "(Y/n), you'll want to look away."

"Why's that?" I glanced towards him as he raised back up before coiling into a sitting position.

"Do you want people to watch when you get undressed?" Todo's coppery eyes caught the moonlight, the small flecks of amber glowing a little and creating a fluctuating pattern in the dark.

"Of course not..." I huffed, tearing my eyes away from his.

"It doesn't bother me that much," Kara laughed from the tree, his scales scraping against the bark before I heard a faintly familiar crinkling sound, "It's not like I'm truly naked underneath the shed."

"No, but you wish you were."

"What's that supposed to mean?" The blue insularis naga turned to look at the pattoni naga, his eyes narrowing into a glare.

"You stink, Kara!" Todo nearly shouted in the silence, "It's obvious that your scent is all over (y/n), and it's clearly marking that you were going to mate her!"

"So what if I was?" Kara quipped, "We talked about it like sensible people, and came to an agreement. Nothing else happened."

He pressed himself against the tree again and began to move away from it slowly, twisting his back to rub against the bark.

"...I would've just taken the chance..."

"What?" I whipped my head around to look at Todo, seeing his eyes lock onto mine with a frown on his lips.

"Most of us would!" He reared up, standing several feet higher than my kneeling position, "We're not as patient as Mr. Painful over there."

"So me treating you all with respect meant nothing to you? I haven't earned that kind of treatment in return?" I scrambled to my feet, my smile disappearing into a neutral line on my face as Todo moved himself a little higher than my new standing position, "What will it take for you to treat me like something other than a disgusting human?"

"(Y/n)..." I heard Kara's warning before Todo lowered himself down to my eye level, his fierce copper gaze drilling into my own color.

"I've already told you what I want from you," The pattoni naga kept his face mere inches from my own, "You've already agreed to my conditions, so the starting time hasn't changed."

"Fine," I closed my eyes as I spoke the word, opening them to watch Todo turn away and take a final drink from the spring before vanishing deeper into the wooded area.

"...what did you agree to?" Kara spoke cautiously, the rubbing sound still prominent in the area.

"...something that I'm not fully sure is a good thing," I sat down heavily on the ground, running my finger just along the water's edge before it trickled off to a small stream, "I had agreed to be Todo's slave when the helicopter landed."

"Why would you do that?"

"Because I thought it would help me get to know him more."

"(Y/n)..." I heard the disappointed tone in Kara's voice, turning my head away from him in acknowledgement of the rash decision, "...just let one of

us know if he does something to...hurt you."

"I'm not going to let him hurt me--" My mouth was covered mid-sentence, a cold hand pressing against it as I was shoved to the ground. Grabbing onto the wrist of the person assaulting me, I opened my eyes to see Kara staring down at me with a neutral look on his face. My heart raced as he slowly pulled his hand away from my mouth, propping himself up by moving his hand next to my head.

"(Y/n), we can overpower you with a mere impulsive thought..." His face softened into worry, "Please don't make light of our strength...we're not human like you."

I was stunned into silence, looking up at Kara's head framed against the moonlight above. My thoughts jumbled in my head, reminding myself over and over that their human appearance had nothing to do with what they really are...

"No...you're all nagas, and I keep forgetting that simple fact," I pressed the heel of my hands into my eyes, smothering the frustrated tears before they could fall down my cheeks, "I'm sorry, Kara...I won't be quiet if Todo hurts me."

"I know we all want to help you live comfortably on the island, just like you helped us in those cages," Kara lowered himself, planting a light kiss on the tip of my nose before completely pulling away from me, "I think I speak for most of us when I say that we love you."

I regained my composure as I watched Kara shed out his old skin, making mental notes on how the shed started near his chest with the scales sitting on his human skin before it trailed down his back and started at the tail. The shed skin was massive and, with Kara's help, it was easy to break up into smaller pieces. We scattered them on the way back to the helicopter, zigzagging our path and leaving little trace of what was actually here.

It was quiet for most of the way back, coming across Ichi before making our way back to the helicopter. Ichi didn't add anything to fill the silence,

but I did catch him looking at me several times. I wasn't going to press if he didn't want to talk.

Giving the flight crew a few more hours to sleep, I walked around the clearing for a while, getting my exercise in and enjoying the cooler weather that was starting to blow in from the ocean. Kara and Ichi hunkered down in the helicopter after I set up a mobile heating fan, coiling up into tight balls right in front of it as soon as it clicked on the heat. Certain that the others were wanting to feel the artificial warmth for the last time, I had tried to focus on giving off a welcoming scent.

I had no idea what the nagas were picking up on in regards to scents, so the past two hours were just me focusing on warm thoughts to try and entice the definitely-not-mind-reading nagas to come back to the helicopter. I wasn't even sure if I was capable of sending scents like they were, with reality landing that thought in the 'definitely not' category after my efforts turned up nothing.

Going around the clearing for nearly the two-hundredth time, I heard a rustle along the far treeline, seeing two nagas emerge as the moonlight caught their pale scales.

"Choro...? Jyushi?"

"(Y/n), you're still awake?" I heard Choro reply, moving closer towards them.

"Yeah, I got plenty of sleep on the helicopter," Motioning back to the open ramp, I moved to walk with them, "There's a small space heater going in the cargo area, with Kara and Ichi already sleeping by it. I thought it would be nice for you guys to have some heat tonight."

"Will you be joining us?" Jyushi's light laugh was heard before I felt his arms wrap around my waist, lifting me up off the ground before holding me against his chest, "It's better if we can all sleep together."

"I will after Oso and Todo come back from their roam."

"Aww...they should be back soon," Jyushi sounded a little disappointed before he set me back down on the ground, moving into the cargo area, "They said something about checking out the water in the area."

"The water...but it's all salt water around the island," I raised an eyebrow, "Did they mention which direction they were going?"

"Follow the north star," Choro pointed up towards the night sky, singling out the tail end of the Little Dipper constellation, "It's the fastest way to the shore that they could find."

"All right," I rolled my shoulders and rubbed my arms as I tried to warm myself back up, "Go head on in and get warm. I'll be back shortly with them."

"Are you sure? We can accompany you," Choro briefly touched my shoulder, concern laced heavily in his voice.

"It's all right," I turned to give him a reassuring nod, "I'll be careful, and there's enough moonlight for me to see by."

"If you're certain..." Choro didn't seem entirely convinced, but didn't fight against my decision as he joined Jyushi in wrapping around Kara and Ichi, enlarging the naga ball to insulate the warmth and spreading it more evenly between them.

I looked back up at the sky and marked a mental trail for me to follow, pushing into the thick foliage surrounding the clearing.

Chapter 37

Keeping the north star in sight, I forged my way through the surrounding woods before breaking past the treeline and standing near an outcropping of rock that sat on the shoreline, the waves breaking over it and crashing down onto the ground before retreating back into the ocean. The moonlight caught the thin waves as they collided with the shoreline, the smaller droplets turning into a spray that scattered on the gentle wind. I watched with a small bit of intrigue before I shifted my gaze over towards the two nagas close to the treeline about fifty feet away, their voices muted at this distance.

"...no business doing that."

The familiar huffy voice labeled the speaker as Todo.

"You think I'm going to do anything about it?" The second naga to speak was definitely Oso, "If you have a problem with it, then go take care of it on your own."

"You're the oldest, Oso. He's moving in on your turf, too."

"Last I checked, I didn't own a living thing."

"So you're just going to let him get away with publicly marking her as his?" Todo scoffed in disbelief, "What the hell happened to you in that cage? You used to be more confident about what you wanted."

"It's okay for us to change, Todo. Not everything needs to go right back to how it was before we were stolen from our island," Oso's voice lowered into a growl, as if he was trying to convince himself that what he said was right.

Todo remained silent for a little while before raising his chest a little, his tail curling around itself, "While you're trying to 'change' into something you're definitely not, I'm going to keep living my life."

He looked over shoulder at me, making me stop in my tracks as Todo turned towards me. His hand rested on my shoulder, quickly twisting me around to face him and pulling me close to his chest, his tail curling up behind me and pressing my waist against him to ensure I was fully flush with his body. I took in a breath to berate Todo, my eyes narrowing in disapproval before one of his hands covered my mouth.

"Todo," I stilled as I heard the growl in Oso's voice, "What the hell do you think you're doing..."

"Oh, so you're upset about

this

, but not the fact that Kara did the

same thing

a few hours ago?" Todo looked past me with a glare, "(Y/n) has agreed to be my slave, for your information. I'm allowed to do this if I wish."

I tried to look back at Oso, but Todo's hand and tail kept me bound in place. His coils tightened around my arms as I fought to push myself away from him, glaring up at him as he gave me a snobbish look in return. A long, deep hiss emanated from Oso's chest, whistling past his open jaw before we were suddenly quiet, silenced by a shout from a nearby male voice not belonging to either Todo or Oso.

Another shout joined in the first one before a gunshot pierced the silence, Todo staggering forward with a cry. He instantly released me, tossing me to the ground as he twisted around to face whatever was attacking him, his teeth bared.

"No, don't fight them!" I screamed at the nagas, "Run!"

The outcry of a few people sounded much closer than the first shout and I scrambled to my feet, shoving Todo in the direction of the helicopter.

"Go! Lose them in the forest and hide with the others," Another rough shove sent Todo sprinting through the treeline, a quick glance of worry sent my way before he disappeared. I turned towards Oso, hearing another crack of gunfire before I stumbled forward, catching my footing before intercepting the red-headed naga. Oso looked ready to murder the hunting party, barely sparing me a glance as I tried to shove him towards the forest line.

"Oso, you need to move...!" Panic rose in my throat, "Oso...!"

He looked down at me, anger burning in his eyes before picking me up like I weighed nothing, turning around as a shot missed where he had been standing and spraying a little bit of dirt into the air. Diving through the thick foliage, Oso tucked my head against his arm to keep my face from being hit by any low hanging branches.

"Damned humans..." A growl hissed through his clenched teeth, his body jerking to the right before bursting through the cover of the trees.

We found ourselves on a plateau that hung over a drop-off into the rough waters below, a large cliff face that was too steep for me to climb surrounding most of the plateau. The noises of our pursuers filled the treeline as Oso looked up at the cliff face.

"Climb it if you can, and get back to the helicopter," I wiggled my way out of his arms, knowing that he'd need them to climb such a surface. Oso tried to reach back to grab my hand, but I took another step away, "You need all the speed you can get and I'd just slow you down."

"I'm not leaving you behind, (y/n)," His black-and-red eyes were hard to see in the moonlight, but the stern look was easy to discern.

"They want to kill you, not me. You're the target," I pointed towards the cliff, "Get going before they see you climb!"

Oso hesitated, looking at me before glancing at the treeline and letting out a frustrated growl before rapidly climbing the steep rocky face. He paused every so often to find secure handholds, the night allowing his coloration to

blend in easily with the dark surface. I lost track of where he went and lowered my glare back to the treeline, seeing three men with rifles burst through the bushes.

They swept the plateau with the rifle barrels before setting their sights on me, fanning out a little to keep me from running back into the woods. The men's dialect sounded like those that had been with the fuel truck, making me think that they were local civilians that thought they found a good game to hunt. I had briefly wondered when they spotted one of the nagas, but the notion was quickly dismissed when one of the men lowered his rifle from me and raised a hand towards me.

"E hele pū me aʻu. E palekana ʻoe me mākou," His dialect was coarse, waiting for a few moments of silence before speaking in English, "You'll be safe with us...come with me."

"I don't want to go with you," I took a few steps back, knowing that I was closing in on the overhang's edge. As long as the nagas were ultimately safe, I wasn't interested in what would happen to me.

"Are you a wild child? We will take you home, clean you up, and feed you."

"I'm no wild child. I've sent my friends away so you can't hurt them anymore," I watched as the men looked towards each other.

"Those inhuman creatures are trying to trick you, to make you want to be with them," The man stepped forward a little more until I took another step back, my foot almost slipping off the edge. I hadn't realized that I was that close...

"Come away from the edge..."

Someone grabbed my hand, pulling me away from the drop-off and into the rough clothing of a figure. They spoke quickly to each other in the local dialect before I pushed myself away from the person holding me to them.

"Easy, easy! We're not here to hurt you."

"I don't want to be near you!" I clenched my jaw tightly, "Especially when you tried to shoot those I love."

"'Lelo‘o ia makemake‘o ia i kēlā mau mo‘o..." One of the other men shook his head disapprovingly, his tone taking on a teasing tone, "They're not capable of love, young lady. No wild animal ever is."

"Neither are you," I shove him away, "You want to track them down, kill them and make them into some sort of twisted trophy. Would you kill your daughter's favorite dog?"

I barely noticed one of the men make a motion with his finger, spinning it in tight circles near his temple before the butt of a hunting rifle collided with the side of my head, the blow knocking me down to the ground. My vision spun and doubled, causing a groan to escape my lips as I tried to climb back up to my feet. If I lost ground here, then who knows what would happen to me...what would happen to the nagas...

I could only hope that Oso and Todo made it back to the helicopter, trying to listen for the large machine revving up for take off. I wanted to go with them to their island, but if I needed to be left here as a distraction, then I'd do every I could to keep this group of hunters from getting their hands on the nagas.

Someone's laughter suddenly cut off as a scream pierced through it, one of the men staggering back while reaching for something on his neck. The other two men shouted in alarm, raising their guns towards something on the first man's back before the man was thrown into them. More shouts echoed throughout the plateau as I tried to regain my footing and clear my vision. I felt something brush against one of my arms before I felt nothing but air blow past me in a harsh gust, my head still trying to make out what was happening.

Oso bit down hard on the man closest to him, feeling his fangs pierce deep into the exposed muscle and bone but not releasing much venom into the bite. The physical damage his fangs and teeth had done would be more than

enough to kill the man. Rushing towards the next target and weaving underneath where the metal pipes were aimed at, he tackled the human with full force, wrapping around him quickly and tightening his coils.

He barely heard the rush of movement before a thick wall of white-and-yellow scales answered the silent call for help he sent moments ago, seeing Jyushi barrel into the third man just as his metal pipe lowered to point at Oso's head. The younger naga made quick work of the disgusting human, his tongue flicking out wildly as he crushed the male's spine into fragments underneath his powerful coils, turning around and focusing on the human Oso was struggling with. A quick exchange of glances dissuaded the younger from interfering, his orange eyes shifting towards a staggered female form that was dangerously close to the edge of a steep drop.

"(Y/n), hold on...!" Jyushi called out, reaching out with both hands as his fingertips brushed against her left arm before she fell over the edge, her body dropping quickly towards the churning dark water underneath.

"(Y/n)!" Both nagas called out, fear laced in their voices as Jyushi started to panic. His wide eyes quickly shot back towards Oso, the red-headed krait finally snapping the human's neck before racing to the edge. Barely the length of a breath passed before Oso glared at Jyushi, the younger's eyes hardened in understanding before they both followed their human female down towards the churning water below.

I tried to take a breath in, instantly pushing through the heavy fog in my head as cold salt water rushed into my mouth, my hands pressing down over my lips. The last thing that I had known was that I was still on the plateau, but hearing the water rush around my ears made me realize that I had definitely fallen off.

I felt something roll over me, dragging me along with its vicious pull before I was slammed against a hard surface, crying out in pain as air bubbles escaped my lips. The wave that had tossed me against some rocks pulled back with the tide, the churning dark water hard to see through as my world was in constant motion. My head bobbed above the crest of a wave for a

moment, sucking in as much air as I could before yelling for help, the plea smothering by the water as another wave rolled over me and shoved me down against the rocky barricade. The tide's grip was tight on me, my body already knocked senseless by the people on the plateau and trying to endure the constant battering and rolling of the sea.

Once more, my head was exposed to air and I took in as much air as I could before I was thrown back down. Something rubbed up against me before the water churned between the object and I, my instincts yelling at me to reach out and grab whatever it was. My fingertips touched something smooth before the ocean surged and I was slammed into the rocky wall again.

The object had come with me as the wave crashed into the rocky shoreline, my eyes barely seeing the paleness of the object before the tide dragged both it and I back out. I had feared that it was a corpse of some kind, nearly screaming as the object entangled itself around my outstretched wrist and attached itself to me. The tendrils that I had imagined around my wrist felt like fingers, shifting my movement against the tide and bringing me close to whatever it was as another hand and arm pressed themselves against my back.

As the wave swelled to crash back into the shoreline, the thing pulled me in the opposite direction and floated up to the surface of the water. The ocean calmed down as I was pulled far enough away from the breaking waves, the half moon shining down on the partially calm surface.

My head was placed against cool skin, my brain worried that I had clung to the corpse. The skin was pale beneath the moonlight, but there was movement in its chest as I heard it take shallow breaths. An arm raised itself from the water, lifting up above my vision for a moment before lowering down to my face, the hand caressing my cheek. I took a deep breath as I took in my new non-chaotic surroundings.

My head and shoulders were definitely laying on a humanoid chest, hearing their strong heartbeat as my ear was pressed against their skin. The person was strong enough to swim on their back as I gained control of my breathing, finally feeling the pounding that my body had taken against the

rocky shoreline. The cold water lapped at my back and chest as the person supported me, the sting of salt water revealing several cuts and bruises that were new on my torso, arms, and legs. I probably had some on my face, as well.

"(Y/n)..." The person breathed out my name, drawing my attention up to their face. Their voice was tight, as if holding back from crying, "I'm sorry I let you fall..."

I lifted my head slowly from their chest, following the faint marks up their abdomen and chest, wrapping around their neck before settling on their face. It was definitely a male, but the eyes weren't human.

"Jyushi...?" I narrowed my eyes, trying to figure out why the reticulated naga was in the water, "Did I...?"

"Yeah...I didn't catch you in time," His arms shifted their grip and pulled me over him, my chest resting against his as my legs limply lay on either side of his thick tail, "I've got you now, though, and I'm not letting go..."

"The humans...what happened to them?" I remembered what happened on the plateau, looking up at the distant cliff-edge.

"They won't bother us anymore," Jyushi was quick to respond, my legs feeling his tail change direction before resuming the slow swimming motion, "Oso and I jumped in after you..."

"I hurt...so much..." I lowered my head, resting my forehead against Jyushi's sternum as I kept my nose and mouth above water level, "I just want to rest..."

"Let's get you to shore and you can rest while we bring you back to the others," The reticulated naga spoke through a smile, his quiet jovial tone reassuring despite us still being in the dark water. I accepted his offer with a small nod, relaxing against him as I let Jyushi do all of the work. His arms wrapped around my back to ensure that I didn't fall off as the water became a little rougher, but it never got to the point like it had previously been at the rocky shoreline. I felt my body shift in his grip from a lying position to

being cradled in his arms as the soft sounds of waves lapping against a nearby beach grew closer, stifling a shudder as the wind blew off of the ocean and onto my salt-soaked clothes.

"(Y/n), you're alive..." I heard Oso's voice from nearby, his voice heavy with relief. Another pair of hands gently pulled my head away from where I rested it against Jyushi's chest, the hands tilting my head over and up as I opened my eyes. The red-headed krait naga looked how I felt: beaten up and tired. I tried to give him a reassuring smile as his hands searched my face for something, his fingertips brushing across cuts I didn't realize I had.

"She's getting cold," Jyushi called out, "We should bring her back to the helicopter and warm her up."

"Right," Oso pulled his concerned eyes away from me, letting his hands drop to his sides, "The salt's going to dry her out more than anything else...look for somewhere she can soak and I'll grab her bag so she can change."

"I don't think I can find warm water here...not without going near other humans."

"There was that spring that Todo notified us of," Oso pointed in some direction, "It's not deep enough for her to be submerged, but it'll be enough for her to wash herself off."

"Be careful with my bag, Oso..." I weakly called out as Jyushi began to carry me off, "There's knives in there, so don't stab yourself."

I didn't hear a response from the oldest naga, but relaxed into Jyushi's arms once more as a soft purr began to reverberate through his chest.

Chapter 38

The water from the spring was cold, but it was much better than the salt water I had dropped into. I used my hands to cup the water from the shallow puddle where most of the water collected before streaming down the little crevice it had carved out over the years, splashing the water over my face and dunking my hair into the water as my fingers worked out the salted clumps.

"We have larger springs on our island..." Jyushi commented, his form not moving from his guarded stance, "There's also a spring in Ichi's territory that is constantly under the sun, so we sometimes use that one when we need warm water."

I glanced over at him, seeing the thick wall of reticulated tail wrapped over itself multiple times to form a wall of sorts around the small spring and myself. It gave me complete privacy, which I used to my full advantage to wash the salt water still clinging to my naked form.

"The river that we met at is actually one of the bigger rivers on the island," Jyushi's voice perked up a little, "I went there a lot just to swim around since it's deep enough."

"How deep is it?"

"About...two of you?" He sounded perplexed as he tried to give me a measurement, "I like swimming through the grass on the bottom."

I laughed a little, "That does sound deep if it's two of me. Maybe we can go swimming together, since I did agree to you showing me around your little bit of the island."

The coils around me shifted a little as Jyushi gasped, "That would be great! Just tell me when you need air, though. I don't think you can hold your breath for as long as I can."

"Definitely not as long as you," I stifled a shudder as I squeezed out the excess water in my hair, feeling some cold droplets fall down my exposed back.

"What are you both talking about?" I heard Oso's voice call out from a little further away.

"I'm going to show her where she can soak on our island," Jyushi answered happily, his length shifting a little before I realized that he was lowering the duffel bag blindly. I gently took the bag from his grip before digging through the top layer to find a set of clean clothes, mentally patting myself on the back for doing all of my laundry before leaving. Taking out a small hand towel, I began to dry myself and slip into the clean clothes.

"Oh, the springs?"

"Yeah, including the warm one in Ichi's part."

"Ah. That one goes away in the colder seasons, so it may not be there when we get back. It was starting to dry up before we left," Oso sounded pensive.

"Aww, really...?" Jyushi deflated a little before flinching from my touch, "Are you done?"

"Yeah, I just need to rinse off the salty clothes, but I've finished my bath," I watched as Jyushi's human half turned into view, his orange eyes slowly meeting mine before pulling away to reveal the spring and myself once more, "Will either of you need to rinse off the salt water?"

Both nagas glanced towards each other before looking back at me, "Not really."

"If you're sure, then I'll get started," I knelt by the waterline of the spring, feeling the cool grass underneath my knees as I pulled up the legs of my shorts a little, "How was everyone else?"

"The woman is working on Todo's shoulder," Oso settled on my right, his position mimicked by Jyushi on my left, "He was shot by the hunters and

she was getting a bullet out of him."

I dropped my salt-soaked shirt into the spring in shock, quickly catching it before it could float further downstream.

"He...was shot?"

Was that why he fell forward and pushed me to the ground...?

"She didn't say it was serious, but he was given that sleeping stuff and Ichi was trying to keep Kara calm," Oso picked out one of my socks from the pile and started to follow what I was doing with my shirt, dipping it into the spring water and rubbing it between his hands before taking it out and squeezing the water out. The process was repeated again until the fabric wasn't sticking together from the salt, "I...didn't tell them what we did to the hunters."

"You and Jyushi...killed them, didn't you..." I held my hands in the water, feeling the current move around them as the shirt unfurled like a flag underwater.

Both nagas stiffened at my sides, their response louder than any words that could be said.

"(Y/n)...they hurt you," Jyushi started, his voice soft, "Oso stayed behind to make sure that you were safe, but when those humans started getting aggressive towards you...he called for help and I responded."

"I know you wanted us to be safe, but..." Oso paused for a moment, setting the squeezed-out sock down on top of the duffle bag, "We want to protect you, too."

I lifted the shirt out of the spring and squeezed it as tight as I could before letting it fall onto the sock Oso had placed. His hand curled underneath my chin and lifted my gaze to look at him, the moonlight catching his red hair.

"Even if that means killing humans."

I narrowed my eyes before fully closing them, moving my head out of his hands and standing up. I had known deep down what the nagas were capable of, even when I first saw Jyushi on the island, and the revelation of information as we escaped the zoo wasn't that surprising to me.

My heart thudded in my chest, my right hand rising up and pressing against my sternum to feel it pulse slightly with each beat. Ignoring what they could do wouldn't help me anymore.

"I know...I just feel like I've failed when I hear about the people you've killed," I turned towards Oso and Jyushi, both nagas still low near the spring with their eyes locked on me, "I know what you're all capable of, what you're built to do as a living thing...but I wanted to ignore that and tried to push past the truth. I know that you're more than capable of killing others, of killing me..."

Jyushi raised himself up a little, reaching out and grabbing my hand with a sorrowful look on his face, bringing me close into a hug, "We'd never kill you...!"

"I know, Jyushi..." I wrapped my arms around his back as I pressed my face into his shoulder, "Humans are terrifying creatures...if we don't fully understand something, we can get scared of it and try to make whatever it is an enemy. When we

do

understand something, we can still mark it as an enemy because we don't like it...I've been willfully keeping myself ignorant of what you all can do because I didn't want to be scared of you."

"(Y/n)," I felt Oso's presence behind me before feeling one of his hands press against my back, "If you're terrified of us...we don't want to force you to live on the island with us. I'm sure the others will agree with me. You don't need to keep yourself chained to us like a burden."

"That's just it, Oso..." I pulled my head away from Jyushi's shoulder to look back at Oso, seeing his normally smirking face twisted into worry, "I can't

go back to America...With my escape, I probably burned so many bridges down that I can't afford to live there anymore. I'd be a wanted criminal and more than likely scorned out of any job that I try to get. I don't

have

a home in America anymore."

"...so you feel like you have no choice but to come with us," Oso spoke the words I didn't want to say, his hand travelling up to my shoulder before hooking around just below my neck and pulling me into a hug from behind, Jyushi loosening his grip so I wasn't choked out. Oso pressed his face into my left shoulder, his other arm wrapping around my waist to complete the hug, "We want you with us, but don't want to drag you kicking and screaming to satisfy our wants."

"I want to go with you, Oso, but I'd rather have gone without leaving a trail of dead bodies."

"What I told Choro and Jyushi to do still really bothers you, huh...?" The krait naga loosened his grip as Jyushi pulled back a little, allowing me to be turned around to face Oso, "I could've done things differently, yes, but I couldn't guarantee that you'd be safe if we just let them do what they wanted to you. We got scared that we'd lose you and took matters into our own hands. I didn't force anyone to act out, and Choro and Jyushi were more than willing to take care of them."

"I'd keep doing it," Jyushi's voice was quiet behind me, drawing my attention back to him, "I told you that I'd keep you safe. It doesn't matter where we are."

"Besides," Oso pressed the bridge of his nose against the side of my exposed neck, "If we really didn't want anything to do with you, we wouldn't have wasted any time trying to get to know you."

A furious blush swept over my face at the intimate gesture, growing rapidly as Jyushi pressed his face against the other side of my neck, both nagas keeping me standing as I felt my knees grow weak. The small part of my

brain that was still working despite the affection warned me that I was still scared of what they could do if I tried to hurt one of them, the venomous naga able to kill me in microseconds and the larger-than-normal constrictor able to crush my spine with a single flex of his coils. Despite the fear trying to rear its head, I pushed it aside with the simple thought that if they wanted me dead, I wouldn't have made it to the helicopter landing pad on Oso's back. If the nagas wanted me dead, then it was going to happen.

They had kept me alive.

Granted, it was probably because they wanted to...mate with me, but something in my heart told me that it was a lot more than just a primal instinct.

I set my feet down on solid ground after being carried by Jyushi, the younger brother winning some kind of silent challenge between him and Oso. Taking my duffle bag from Oso's arms, I quietly dropped it into a holding box in the helicopter's cargo area before moving towards Stacy and Todo. The youngest naga was completely knocked out, his arms limp by his sides with his head turned away from Stacy as she knelt over his back. Choro held up the flashlight that she was using before, ignoring the other two nagas visually fighting with each other.

My arrival stopped the fight, Kara looking over at me before his eyes shifted to Oso.

"Is there anything you need me to do?" I knelt on the other side of Todo, asking Stacy while ignoring what was going on elsewhere.

"Not much else to do," She bent down and cut the suture thread, securing the knot before starting another one, "I wasn't expecting to repair a gunshot wound, but it wasn't that deep. Just sitting above his shoulder blade."

Another knot was tied off, closing the clean wound. Stacy took her needle, thread, and partially bloody gloves, and throwing them into a ziploc bag, "He'll be a little sore when he wakes up, but that's about it."

"That's...good news, then," I sighed as I sat back up, eyeing the small cut before Stacy took the flashlight from Choro, "I'm sorry that you had to do it."

"No worries," She smiled before clicking the flashlight off, "That's what I was brought on for, and I'm glad that it could be addressed before they went home."

"I'll move him in front of the heater," Choro excused himself as he gently picked up Todo's human half, dragging him over to the middle of the cargo area where the heater was running. Jyushi had curled up in front of it, but instantly moved over to give Todo the space before stretching out his length and wrapping around Todo and Choro when they settled in.

"Your hair's wet."

"Yeah, I had a bit of an accident, but everything's better now," I looked back at Stacy with a smile on my lips.

"Is that why the retic bolted out of here?" She tossed the sealed ziploc bag on top of her medical bag, digging out a hand sanitizer wipe and ripping it open, "The injured one came back a few moments later and that's when the blue one got mad."

"Things happened, but most of it has been taken care of," My eyes wandered towards the stare-down that Kara and Oso were having, neither of them moving much, "Are we able to leave soon?"

Stacy looked at her wristwatch, "Their alarms should go off in a moment or two. I had told them to grab more sleep when you weren't in the bay."

"I should've left a note," I rubbed the back of my head, "Sorry about that."

"The space heater with a sleeping naga in front of it was more than enough of a note," She excused herself before moving towards the personnel area, leaving me with the nagas in the cargo bay.

I shuddered a little from the chill air before walking towards the naga pile in front of the heater, sitting down in front of Jyushi's outer coil and leaning against him. A soft hiss sounded before a finger lifted some hair away from my face, my eyes looking over to see the pointed smile of Choro. He moved a little closer to push his shoulder against my back, curling up a little against me.

"You seem different..."

"Different, how?" I turned a little to look down at his dark green eyes, completely hidden in the darkness.

"...it's like you've let something go, something that was holding you back before," His head appeared to track my movement, his hand raising up against my cheek as his fingers ran through my partially damp hair, "I can't say what exactly, but you seem...happier."

I leaned into his hand a little, a smile resting on my lips, "Yeah, you're probably right, Choro...I think I've just learned to let things go."

As I turned back to face the space heater, I felt Choro move against me to resume his previous position. Glancing towards the cargo bay ramp and out towards the night sky barely visible above the treeline, I took in a deep breath and released it slowly, a happy feeling swelling within my gut.

Another two days of flying, and we'd all be free.

Together.

Chapter 39

The helicopter hummed as it followed the charted path over the vast expanse of dark ocean, the sound a little more muted than before as my feet felt the vibrations pulsing across the floor. The nagas had all balled up together again, sharing the remaining warmth that the heater had given off before it needed to be turned off.

I sat quietly in one of the seats attached to the helicopter frame, leaning forward and cupping my chin in my left hand as the moonlight poured through the small windows, the light interrupted as the rotor whirled through the air. The sounds the nagas were making told me that they were all asleep, Todo knocked out from the impromptu surgery while the others were probably still exhausted. It made me wonder if they had really slept while they were in their enclosures.

Stacy had fallen asleep in a safety rig strapped to the frame for stability so she wouldn't fall onto the floor if there was turbulence. I felt tired, too, but my mind was too busy trying to figure out what I would need to do on the island in order to survive.

It was definitely large enough to support a small tribe, with various sources of freshwater and plants that could produce nourishment when farmed correctly. The only issue was that I'd have to make every tool I needed by hand, and I wasn't exactly the crafty type.

A hand on my knee drew my attention to the outstretched arm of a naga, his coloration hidden by the shadows in the cargo bay. I removed the hand under my chin and placed it on top of his, giving a soft smile.

"Can't sleep?"

"...you should be asking yourself that," The voice was unmistakable, the low tone of Ichi's voice easy enough to hear despite the rotor hum above us, "You heard what they said, so why are you still awake?"

I slid down from the seat and moved closer to him, knowing that he couldn't come to me without shifting his weight around. His hand lifted from my knee as I sat cross-legged in front of him, "My mind can't seem to settle down, so I've just been thinking about things that I'd need to do on the island."

"You probably wouldn't need to do much...Jyushi seems happy enough to do everything for you."

"I know, but I can't eat the same things you all can," I watched as the moonlight waved over Ichi's face, the helicopter turning in its trajectory. He still seemed tired, but all of his attention was on me.

"The raw meat?"

"Mostly that, but I was also thinking of starting a small veggie or fruit farm for something I'd need," I let him reach out and touch my face, his fingers gently travelling from my forehead to my right cheek as his thumb pushed aside the eyepatch, "...it still looks bad, doesn't it...?"

"You shouldn't have gotten it in the first place," Ichi removed the eyepatch completely, his thumb ghosting over my right eyelid before pulling it open, "Will it...fully heal?"

"I'm not sure if it'll repair itself without surgery," The words left my lips in a whisper, sadness filling my voice as the tone was mimicked by the look on Ichi's face, "I just need to keep it covered for a few more days, but even after that I'll still be sensitive to light and glare."

"I'm sorry that I didn't act fast enough to save you," Ichi lowered his head towards mine, the eyepatch still in his hand as our foreheads touched, "I did the only thing I could, and I still don't think it was enough. If I was strong like Jyushi or had venom like the older three, then I could've been more helpful."

"You were more than helpful, Ichi," I leaned into him, "You were my hero that night."

"...I wasn't a hero..." Ichi started to pull away before I pressed my hands against his cheeks, holding his head in place.

"Of course you were. If you hadn't gotten help, then I probably would've been dead."

"But..." He gently lay a hand over his faded bite mark on my forearm.

"I've never blamed you for this," I felt his fingers search for the little dented scars in the skin, my arm permanently carrying his bite.

"I want to apologize...but I don't know what the right words are, and anything that I do say would just feel meaningless because I know I would just keep hurting you again," Ichi recoiled from me, a light hiss escaping his lips as his breathing increased.

"Then I'll keep forgiving you," I caught his hand before he fully retracted it away from me, quickly intertwining our fingers so he couldn't pull away. The gesture caught him off-guard, staring at our hands like it was a creature he'd never seen before, "Ichi...look at me."

His dark eyes slowly met my own.

"I care about you, much more than I can ever really say," I tugged his hand past my head, bringing our faces close, "So...let me show you again."

Ichi didn't resist the kiss, stiffly receiving it from me before his mind seemed to put the pieces together, pressing his lips back against mine. I let him hold the kiss for as long as he wanted, pulling away without resistance as I released his hand. Ichi covered his lips with his free hand, his eyes wide before slightly closing as he lowered his guarded hand.

"Can we do that...one more time?"

The morning sunlight started to stream in from the windows, streaking across my eyes as the helicopter made another turn. I flinched as my right eye screamed in agony from the brief flash of light over my eyelids,

instantly covering it with a hand and wondering what happened to the eyepatch. My answer was easily found as I looked over to see Ichi curled up around me, the eyepatch held in his hand as he slept.

Gently taking it back and slipping it on, I carefully climbed off the top of the naga pile without disturbing any of them and sliding back into the folding seat I was in before.

"Good morning," I heard Stacy call out from her seat, "You've all been out for a long time."

"What's 'a long time' in this context?" I rubbed the heel of my palm over my left eye, stifling a yawn.

"We're a few hours away from the island."

I stilled, shocked awake by the chipper attitude of the vet despite having missed nearly two whole days because I was

sleeping

.

"Ah, geez...I'm sorry to not be awake the whole time," I groaned as I looked over to the nagas still sleeping.

"No worries. I had my own forms of entertainment," She lifted up a large book that was resting open on her lap, "We had figured you'd be out for the entire flight, considering what you've all gone through."

"You don't know half of it..." I thought back to the 'meetings' between Calmine and I, satisfied that I wouldn't have to answer to that man anymore, "Captivity can really be draining."

"Well, captivity is far behind you all now."

"That's where I hope it'll stay for them," I looked over at the sleeping nagas.

"What about you?" Stacy leaned forward, catching my eye and shifting my focus back to her.

"What

about

me?"

"Why not come back to the States with us?" She looked towards the nagas, "I know that you're the one that saved them, but...I don't like the thought of leaving you alone on the island."

I frowned a little, hearing one of the naga's breathing change mid-breath, "The thought of being the only human on their island does scare me, but I'm not worried about it since I'll be watched over by six pairs of eyes. I was thinking of raiding the laboratory that I used to be stationed at on the island for supplies that I'd need...if it's still there."

"Are you sure...?" Stacy's tone dropped a little.

"I gave it a bit of thought," I closed my eyes briefly and leaned back against the inner hull of the helicopter, "I would be a criminal if I went back to the States, and I don't have enough funds to bring Calmine to court over his gross mistreatment of animals. I think I'd be better off with them."

"If that's what you've decided, then I'll let Jeff know," She sighed a little before a smile spread across her lips.

"Why?" I raised an eyebrow at her sudden turn in expression.

"He had said that if you had a change of heart about abandoning America, he'd have a position open for you at his company since biologists of your skill and passion are hard to come by," Stacy lay a finger over a page before closing the book over it, shifting her gaze to me, "It would pay well, and you'd be free to live life under a different name."

"Jeff had a whole 'nother identity if I wanted to come back to America?" I scoffed a little.

"The money that came in from the GoFundMe page was a lot more than he expected, so he set a portion aside as a 'plan b' to cover attorney fees and legal paperwork for changing your identity."

"No way..." A laugh slipped through my lips as disbelief covered my face, "What was the page advertising?"

"A large shipment of rare creatures needed to be rescued from an animal abuser that acquired them illegally."

"And people supported the rescue effort?"

"Of course," Stacy shrugged a little, "One of the people that pledged a lot of money had found an article written about you and the nagas online and linked it on the page. A majority of the people sending money after that were fully in your corner to get the nagas home after hearing about how they were plucked from their island."

"I wonder if that's what made Calmine bump up his touring schedule..." I leaned forward and rested my chin on my hand, "We were supposed to stay in San Diego for six months before travelling to somewhere in the Midwest. Instead, he pushed it forward a month or two before completely changing it and offering the nagas up to a few private collectors."

"It's possible, but there wasn't anything that he could really do about it if he did find out."

"Well, he tried to do something about it."

We laughed for a little bit before another turn changed the scenery outside the little round windows of the helicopter.

The water had lightened from a dark blue to a color that rivaled the teal-blue of Kara's scales, white-capped waves cresting up before falling back into the ocean as the teal-blue water gave way to partially sandy shores. I straightened up in my seat as the island came into view near the bottom of the window, the helicopter adjusting its approach vector.

The island looked just like it had when I landed on it, showing off its different biomes to those that looked at it. A thick lush jungle covered a majority of the inland while giving way to rocky shores and sandy beaches along its shoreline, a large mountain range rising out of the jungle and dragging the trees up with its slopes before giving way to several exposed mountaintops. The mountain range slopes rolled into hills near its southern edge while flattening out completely on its north side, spreading out into more exposed land that seemed to resemble plains spotted with tree foliage.

"Quick," I motioned frantically to Stacy, "Do you have a camera or something?"

"Yeah, here," She struggled to bring out her phone, handing it to me when it was unlocked. I opened up the camera function and started to take aerial pictures of the island, getting what shots I could before it disappeared as the helicopter changed course.

"...are you going to show them?"

"Yeah," I handed her back the phone, "It looks untouched from here, and they've never seen it from the sky before. I want to show them how beautiful their home is."

Stacy smiled as she scrolled through the pictures, "I'll be sure to delete them after we take off."

A few moments passed in relative silence as I watched the ocean beneath us start to shift from that dark blue color into the teal-blue, signalling that we were closing in.

"Would...it still be okay if I took a look at..." Stacy paused as she thought of a name, "...Ichi? Since you were sleeping for most of the flight, I want to make sure that I can take a look at his wound before the helicopter leaves."

"Sure, I'll ask him about it," I briefly tore my eye away from the vast green canopy that spread out underneath the helicopter, "Do you know how long it'll take?"

"It shouldn't be that long if I'm just looking at it. If it needs immediate attention, then I'll let you know," She offered a smile before reaching over her shoulder to hold a welded handle when the helicopter slowed down, the familiar sensation of falling settling in my stomach as I hurried to sit down. A few moments later, there was a soft drop before I heard the engines start to wind down as Grant walked through the doorway leading to the personnel area.

"Ladies and gentlesnakes, it's my pleasure to let you know that we've landed safely," He looked towards Stacy and myself, his voice stirring the nagas from their sleep, "It'll take a few minutes to go through the landing checklist before you're able to disembark, but that'll go by much faster than the flight itself."

"Grant, was there any sign of people being here recently?" I stood up as he turned to duck back through the doorway, looking at me from over his shoulder, "Like...could you tell this landing zone had been used recently?"

"We saw that some of the closer trees had been pushed back a little from heli rotors, but we're not sure if that was recent damage or from months ago. It was a really tight squeeze for us, so if the previous helicopter that came here was a Mi26, then she would've left scars," Grant gave me a reassuring smile, "If a Mi26 was the last one here, then we're the first visitors in a while."

"Thanks, Grant," I returned the smile before he gave a small wave, disappearing from view. Stacy's small groan as she stood up drew my attention back to her.

"Well...I can see that you're awake, Ichi."

I noticed the lavender corn naga flinch a little at his name, looking over at her slowly before noticing me also staring at him.

"...you wanted to see my wound...?"

"If you'll allow me," Stacy added, not moving anywhere until he gave her an answer. Ichi looked at the mess of coils around and over his own tail,

pulling free slowly before rubbing the back of his neck.

"...fine."

"Great," She nodded before grabbing the stethoscope and a small pair of metal tweezers, moving around the waking pile of nagas and kneeling next to Ichi. I cautiously walked over, my eyes on the healing stab wound as Stacy went through the check-up procedure she had done with Oso. After looking satisfied with the preliminary check, she focused on the wound and asked for permission to touch it. Ichi glanced at me briefly for reassurance before agreeing, watching her movements carefully as Stacy gently lay her fingers above and below the wound. Spreading her fingers apart, she tugged the skin open before letting go and repeating the process for either side.

"Yeah, this looks good," She looked up at Ichi, "Well, it doesn't

look

good, but the wound is definitely healing. Just don't go near sand or scratch at it as it heals, and it should be almost as good as new before long."

"Will his shedding affect it at all?"

"It'll probably itch like crazy while the top layer of keratin on the scales loosens, but the wound is mostly on his skin. That will be what's going to heal it," Stacy pointed out the line between scales and skin on Ichi's waist, pulling up the skin above the wound to show that a majority of the wound rested right above the line. There were two smaller scales that were scratched up, but those would heal with the shed he was about to have.

Grant stepped out from the personnel area with a large grin on his face as he maneuvered around the nagas, reaching out to depress a button on the ramp control panel, "Checklist is all green. Welcome home."

Chapter 40

The ramp lowered to reveal the all-too-familiar clearing as the rotors spun down, the draft created by the blades sending a backdraft into the cargo bay that slowly died to a breeze before stopping altogether.

Oso was the first at the bottom of the ramp, leaning down and running his hand over the grass that was pressed down by the ramp. His forked tongue flicked from his mouth slowly, spreading the tines wide before slipping back in as he turned towards his brothers.

I could only guess that he 'said' something to them through scent with a sudden change in attitude rippling through the nagas. Choro and Ichi were out of the helicopter first, quickly diving into the forested area surrounding the clearing and disappearing from view. Kara was a bit more tentative, helping the partially-awake Todo out from the bay despite the protests from the younger brother. Oso and Jyushi were the last ones to leave the cargo bay, but still held back from going their own way.

"We'll be here for a little bit longer if you change your mind," Stacy softly stated as I slung my duffle bag over my shoulder, looking back at her.

"You're not taking off immediately?"

"We'll need to acquire a flight path in Australia to the airport before we can take off. Need to save as much gas as we can," Grant gave the hull a pat, "It shouldn't be more than thirty minutes or so, just a bunch of talking and asking various people for permission to be squeezed into their flight schedule."

"(Y/n)," Oso called out from the clearing, drawing my attention to him before I looked back towards Grant.

"If I change my mind before then, I'll let you guys know. Don't wait for me," I gave a small wave as I moved to Oso and Jyushi, a seed of worry

growing in my gut as I looked at the serious expressions on their faces, "...guys?"

"What did you want to do with her?" Oso shifted his eyes over my shoulder, the only emotion held within his red-and-black hues was fury. I partially turned to look where he had motioned towards, seeing someone duck behind a tree. The duffle bag slid down my arm before I took off after the person, anger fueling my legs as I leapt through the bush they had tried to spy through.

Their olive skin was hard to spot as they ran through the forest, the sunlight streaming through the canopy offering some shaded camouflage as the person kept running. I chased them down, following the brown-colored braid that trailed behind them before they were stopped by a wall of green and purple. Choro and Ichi hissed loudly as the person quickly recovered and sprinted to their right, my legs adjusting to follow their trajectory and jumping over a small fallen tree.

"Erika!" I shouted her name, a light growl in my voice as I was finally in range to touch her, taking a chance to reach out and grab her wrist. Wrapping my fingers around her left wrist, I dug my heels into the ground and sent us both tumbling down a low-grade slope, the underbrush partially cushioning our fall as she turned on me and started fighting back. The hill did nothing to slow our movements as Erika grabbed my neck and tried to pin me underneath her, a look of fury in her eyes as I clawed at her face.

Her side slammed into a tree and broke her grip on me, sending us separate ways as the hill leveled out. I quickly put my feet underneath me, slipping a bit on the decaying leaves before gaining some momentum as Erika righted herself, lowering my shoulder into her back and shoving her back into the ground underneath me.

"Erika," I narrowed my eyes as she struggled to throw me off, my dominant hand grabbing a fistful of her hair and pinning it to the ground so she couldn't move very much, "Why did you betray me?!"

"Just let me leave, (y/n)!" She cried out, partially in pain while frustration tightened her voice, "You have no idea what it's like to be stranded here

alone!"

"You..." I recoiled mentally from her words before shifting my weight forward, pushing down on her harder, "

You

have no idea what you and your greedy boss put me and the nagas through! I came here for a fucking

job

! Instead, I get knocked out and shipped out like an animal back to the States, forced to act like a fool in front of the public while making sure the beings

you

helped trap are kept safe until I could figure out a way to bring them back!"

"That's the one who kept sneaking about our hunting grounds," Choro called out from somewhere nearby, my focus never leaving the writhing figure underneath me.

"I only did what I was told to do because that's what I got paid for," Erika suddenly bucked me off from her, turning around to face me before staggering back to her feet, "It's not my fault that you weren't smart enough to keep sensitive information hidden."

"You and Karl were paid to find rare creatures, and you couldn't do it," I snarled as I backed away from her, the look on her face twisting into a dangerous emotion. She screeched as she lunged towards me, the noise silenced as a scaled wall of purple slipped in between us.

"You were the human that tried to draw me out," Ichi snarled, his breath coming out as a guttural hiss. There was a grunt of disapproval from Erika, possibly due to her mouth being smothered by something, "You're disgusting...Aah!"

His sudden cry of pain was sharp, shocking my nerves as Ichi curled up on his side...his

wounded

side.

"Leave them be!" I lunged at her, jumping over Ichi's form and pushing her away from him. Sparing a brief glance back at Ichi, I saw his hands press against his wound, confirming that Erika had hit it to drive him back.

"When I contact Calmine, you'll be in for a world of hurt, (y/n)!" Erika shifted her footing to sprint away before her neck was grabbed by a hand, the green scales along the arm marking which naga had caught her.

"I'm sorry...were you just threatening to bring that

human

here?" Choro's lips pulled into a sardonic smile, easily lifting Erika off the ground and partially turning back towards me, "Can you believe the gall of this thing?"

"Let go of me!"

"Choro..." I relaxed a little bit as he held Erika aloft with a hand, her feet kicking out and connecting with his side but he didn't give any kind of reaction to the beating, "That's the person who stole my field journal and gave it to the people that captured you."

His pupils widened dangerously like a snake closing in on its prey, shifting his focus back to Erika, "...oh?"

"You're the one that was hired to find them in the first place!" Erika tried to look over at me, Choro's hand keeping her from moving, "When I told Calmine that nothing I was doing was working, he looked through the newest batch of graduates to try and find some dumbass that would fit the bill. He found

you

, and it worked."

"Yeah, Karl told me before he died," I relaxed my body, rolling my shoulders in a partial shrug before turning to tend to Ichi. I gently lifted his hands away from his wound to see that the protective scab had been partially ripped away, revealing the tender flesh and muscle underneath, "Ah, shit...Let's get you to Stacy, Ichi. She'll fix you up."

I grabbed his arm carefully and started walking away from Choro and Erika before she called back out, "What do you mean Karl's dead?"

"I mean he was killed by my friends," I barely glanced back at her, "He brought it upon himself."

"...you bitch!"

"What did you want me to do with her?" Choro watched as I started to walk away with Ichi. I stopped moving for a moment before turning back.

"Erika, you said that you were stranded here," My comment stilled her movements, catching her attention, "The helicopter will be leaving shortly if you want a ride on it. I'm sure the crew will be willing to take you...but you need to convince Choro to let you go first."

I helped Ichi move towards where the helicopter had landed, his hand pressing down on the newly-opened wound as I tried to do what I could to offer support. Ichi probably could've made it without me, but I didn't want to be around when Choro made his decision to release Erika or not.

Nature would take its course as it always had with the nagas.

We breached the line of foliage into the clearing, the helicopter still sitting there with the ramp down. Oso had positioned himself halfway between the ramp and where Kara had taken Todo, his head focused on something else before we drew his attention.

"Stacy's ready for you," Oso moved aside as Ichi gave a short nod, allowing me to take my hands off of his arm before moving back into the cargo bay. The oldest naga and I waited outside the helicopter while Ichi was fixed up as much as Stacy had the ability to.

A small uncomfortable silence settled between us before Oso took in a breath.

"So..."

I looked up at him, catching his dual hues before he looked away towards the nearby foliage.

"...you saved my little brother again."

"I did nothing of the sort," I shifted my gaze back towards the open cargo ramp, "I wasn't expecting to find Erika still here, and chased after her for answers. What she gave was what I already knew..."

"But you didn't kill her," Oso cut in, "That was definitely the intent I was picking up from you when you ran after her."

"I left that up to Choro..."

"You know what he's going to do," The red-headed naga lowered himself closer to the ground, lounging a little on his coils.

"He's welcome to do as he pleases. You're all home, and I told him my conditions for letting her go free."

"...which was...?"

"If she could convince Choro to release her, she's welcome to leave when the helicopter takes off."

"(Y/n), you continue to surprise me," Oso scoffed a little, "I didn't know you were so cold-blooded."

"I'm not," I huffed a little, crossing my arms over my chest, "Trust me, I wanted to throttle her so bad that she wouldn't be recognizable...but I just couldn't bring myself to do it."

"So you pushed your decision onto Choro," His index finger pressed lightly into my cheek teasingly, "That's why I said you're cold-blooded."

"...you make it sound bad when you say it like that," My voice lowered as I looked down at my shoes, kneeling down to brush off the dirt and debris, "I can't just abandon the morals that had kept me safe in civilization, but I know that they don't really apply here."

"Just be you," Oso pressed his cheek against mine, his arms wrapping around my shoulders before I could stand back up, "We don't want you to change into something that you're not comfortable with."

"I'm not going to change, Oso," I pressed a hand against his topmost arm. I felt Oso flinch against me before pulling away, turning to face the direction that I had come from. My eyes followed his movements to see Choro emerge from the treeline.

No one else was with him.

"How's Ichi? Is his wound all right?" Choro asked as soon as he noticed I was looking at him.

"Stacy's taking care of it now," I held back from asking what happened with Erika, both wanting to know what she said and not wanting to find out what he did with her, "They should be finished soon."

"We've actually just finished," Stacy called out as she stepped down from the ramp, holding a small clear baggie in her hand. I met her halfway, taking the bag from her and seeing a few closed tubes inside, "This is what you'll need for both Oso's and Ichi's wounds. There's also some antibacterial cream for yourself just in case you get hurt or scratched."

"And Ichi...?" The question faded on my lips as the aforementioned naga made his appearance on the ramp, slowly moving down towards Oso and

Choro. A thick pad of gauze was taped to his skin, completely hiding the scabbing wound from view.

"There wasn't much damage. I only made sure that there was nothing stuck in the open wound before I flushed it out and treated it, wrapping it as a precaution. He was told to keep it on for a day or two, but if it bothered him too much then he's able to remove it," Stacy picked up my unasked question, "Was there...anything else that I can do before we leave? Our flight path to Australia was just confirmed a few minutes ago while I was flushing the wound."

This was it. The last chance I had to leave and go back to civilization.

I looked back at the three nagas, watching them communicate with each other silently before Ichi turned to leave the clearing, the older two glancing back at me before talking with each other. My heart fluttered in my chest with a mixture of excitement and nervousness.

"I'm staying with them."

"Then...here's where we part ways," Stacy opened up her arms for a hug and I took the invitation, "Take care of yourself, (y/n)."

"You as well, Stacy," I backed away as she walked up the ramp, waving a farewell to Grant as he closed the ramp while he returned the gesture. Moving towards the treeline with Oso and Choro, I watched as the helicopter spun up its engines, the giant turbines moving the sagging large rotor until it was nearly impossible to count the individual blades unless I blinked. The wind draft created by the helicopter was harsh, loose grass and branches flying away from the center of the whirlwind as the engines whirred higher in pitch. It lifted into the sky, the army tan paint clearly marking it against the vivid blue sky before it lurched forward, disappearing from sight beyond the canopy.

I stood in place until I couldn't hear the helicopter's engines anymore, complete silence filling its place.

Chapter 41

"So..." Oso dragged the word out, letting silence fill the space afterwards before speaking again, "...what now?"

"Now, I salvage what I can from the lab," I shouldered the duffle bag and began to walk towards the path I had in my mind, following my own footsteps from months before as the jungle thickened around me. Choro and Oso trailed behind me, staying silent as they pushed through the undergrowth. I had thought that they would head towards their own homes or dens, to feel that they were really back on their island.

My feet guided us down the trodden path, the camouflaged outer walls of the lab peeking through the tree trunks before coming into full view. It showed signs of enduring bad weather as the 'roof' sagged a little bit, heavy with leaves and standing water, while the front door flap was wide open.

"You both can stay out here..." I shrugged off the bag and stepped through the 'doorway', pulling open the inner flap and stepping into what I used to call home on this island.

Erika had kept most of it clean, retaining the sanitary conditions near the specimen room and kitchen. The bunk room was in disarray, most of the cots turned over while the padding was piled high alongside an interior corner. I checked the kitchen's food stores and found them nearly dry, but the recycled water supply was nearly full.

Grabbing a few large canteens, I filled them up with the cleaned rainwater after tasting it to ensure its purity. Opening the cabinets, I realized that Erika had left several boxes of protein bars unopened, tossing them down to the ground on top of the canteens.

"(Y/n), do you need any help?" Choro must've drawn the short stick to check up on me, his head cautiously peeking around the corner as I rifled through the other cabinets, "We heard a lot of noise..."

"No, I've got this..." I stretched out my left arm as far as it would go, my fingertips barely brushing the bottom edge of a box before Choro's hand grabbed the box firmly before bringing it down, "Ah...thanks."

"Is this all of the food you'll need?" He looked towards the small pile on the floor, eyeing the canteens.

"It's going to help when there's not a lot of food for me to eat from the island," I opened the box to see a variety pack of granola bars, wondering why Erika hadn't touched them or the protein bars, "Think of it as an emergency ration when your regular food supply runs out."

"I don't think you'll have to worry about that," Choro leaned over his gathering coils, raising an eyebrow, "You know that we'll take care of you to the best of our ability."

"I know that, but I don't think you guys can control the weather. When the rains stop, then things dry up and become hard to find," I snagged a large bag from underneath the countertop, opening it wide and tossing my little pile of edible treasure into it. Cinching it closed, I shifted my gaze towards the green mamba naga staring at me, "At least...I don't think you can control the weather."

"No, we can't," He laughed a little, a smile spreading across his lips, "We can only know what the sky tells us--"

I let out a frustrated grunt, interrupting and startling Choro as I slammed the heel of my right hand into my forehead, "I knew I'd forget

something!

"

"(Y/n)?"

"I'm fine...I just forgot to show you all what your island looked like from the air," I sat down on the floor heavily, closing my eyes tightly as a groan flowed from my lips, "It looked so nice, too..."

"If...that's what you wanted to show us, then I can show you my favorite spot in my territory," He lifted my chin with a hand, drawing my focus up to his face as the naga moved closer, "It won't be the same as flying, but..."

Releasing the frustration through a soft sigh, I lifted my eyes towards his as a smile swept over my face, "That sounds like a good idea, Choro."

"Then...can I take you there now?"

"I'd like to find somewhere that I can call home first. After that, you can show me," I pursed my lips in thought, knowing that most of the island was unexplored.

"Why not here?" Choro motioned to the lab around us.

"Because we don't know if Calmine will come back for it," I shook my head, "It's a good place for shelter, but I don't want to be surprised in the middle of the night by someone unexpected."

"Right...

him

," He lowered his hand from my chin, moving away and 'standing' up to his full height, "Is there anywhere you don't want to sleep?"

"Someplace where I wouldn't overheat would be nice, but I don't think I'd have to worry about that at night," I shouldered the food bag and walked towards the front entrance, Choro following close behind. Oso's face perked up when he watched us reappear, my duffle bag in his hands.

"Find everything you'll need?" He asked with a grin on his face.

"Most of what I'll need to survive food-wise. Choro and I were just discussing a place for me to bunker down on the island, since this is Calmine's," I pointed a thumb towards the lab, "Have any suggestions?"

"My den is always nice and cozy," Oso's red-and-black eyes partially closed, the smile shifting into a smirk before Choro barked his disapproval.

"(Y/n) isn't allowed anywhere near that deathtrap you call home, Oso."

"Please...Just because it's buried near a riverbed doesn't make it a deathtrap," The red-headed naga shrugged nonchalantly, my mind filled with imagery of the den flooding during the rainy season.

"No, I think I'll find my own place to stay," I tried to give a reassuring smile, "Is there anywhere on the island that you guys haven't claimed as your territory?"

"It's all been divided between us, but I'm sure that if you find somewhere in someone's claim, then they wouldn't mind giving it up to you," Choro tried to reassure me while Oso lifted an eyebrow.

"Todo and Ichi probably wouldn't want her anywhere near them, so those drier areas wouldn't be good," The oldest mentioned as he tapped a finger against his chin, "Jyushi, on the other hand--"

"(Y/n) can stay with me!"

Choro, Oso, and I turned our eyes upward to see the albino reticulated naga grinning widely down at us, his thick coils gripping onto the tree branches as his human half hung low. Jyushi laughed a little before climbing down the nearby tree that was supporting his entire weight, swiftly moving towards the group and squeezing between Oso and I.

"I promised that I'd show her around the island when we got back, so I can show her all of the good places to sleep, too!" His arms wrapped around my shoulders, pressing my back into his stomach as he rested his chin on top of my head, "Please?"

"When did this promise happen?" Oso shirked away from the sudden presence of the reticulated naga, giving him enough room while his eyes narrowed in suspicion.

"In the cages," Jyushi answered, his voice rumbling against my back and head, "I won't let anything hurt her..."

"If we go, then what about my bags?" I tried to look up at him, the weight shifting off of me as my colored eyes met his orange hues, "I don't think it's a smart--"

"I'll carry them," The smile was wide on Jyushi's face. I started to think that there wasn't anything that could bring down the positive mood he was in.

"If you're sure," I barely lifted up the food bag before he took it from me, slinging it over his shoulder before reaching for my duffel bag, only to be stopped as Oso moved it away from Jyushi's hand.

A silent moment of tension passed, Oso glaring at Jyushi while his forked tongue flicked in and out before he rolled his eyes, the duffle bag brought back within reach of the reticulated naga. Jyushi slung the duffle bag over the food bag, lowering himself to hold out a hand towards me.

"We can go when you're ready."

"All right," I laughed a little at the unusual display of chivalry, taking his hand gently before letting Jyushi guide me through the brush. A quick glance over my shoulder revealed Choro turning towards Oso with a concerned look while the oldest stared right at me with worry. A nervous feeling tightened in my stomach as I looked away, watching my step as I walked a little behind Jyushi.

"Jyushi...did Oso say something to you?"

"He made me promise to not let you get hurt," The cheerful smile fell a little, "Oso...really likes you, (y/n)."

The tone of Jyushi's voice made me stop, looking up to him and holding his gaze when he looked back at me.

"Jyushi...does that feeling go for you, as well?" The pang in my heart hurt as the joyful look completely fell away from Jyushi's face, revealing the conflicted look that his tone had clued me into.

"Of course it does..." He reached up and pressed a hand over his left eye, wiping something away before locking his gaze onto me, "I really like you, too, (y/n), but I don't want to share you with anyone else. I want to be the only one to take care of you since I found you first...!"

His voice sounded tense as tears started to fall from his eyes. His muscles jumped under his scales as I lay a hand on his tail, letting my fingers trail up to his back as I stepped closer to him, pulling him down into a hug. The bags slipped from his shoulders as he fully returned the gesture, embracing me tightly in a hug that Jyushi clearly needed. His fingers dug into the back of my shirt, pressing down hard against my skin before clenching and balling the fabric in his fists as his arms pinned me to his chest.

"It's not fair...(Y/n), I want you to only be with me...!"

I closed my eyes as I took in his words, feeling him cry into my shoulder as I found the words to speak.

"Jyushi," I licked my lips nervously, finding them suddenly dry, "I think I understand what you're feeling. I really like you, too, so much so that I'd be happy to call it 'love'. I enjoyed all of our time together, regardless if we were just lounging in the trees or back in the room. Every second was enjoyable with you, and I don't regret any of it. You were there to comfort me when I needed it, and you were there to keep me safe when I was sleeping. The relationship we have is more special than anything I could have with your brothers...and I hope to feel this way soon for all of them."

"Then..." Jyushi slightly pulled away, cleaning off his face with a hand before settling his eyes on my gentle smile, "...I won't need to fight for your attention?"

"Not at all. It's not my intention to split you all up, but I do want to respect the feelings we all have for each other."

"Can...I be considered your favorite?"

"You're my favorite reticulated naga, Jyushi. I'll come to you whenever I need comforting, or when I want to feel safe," I gave him a reassuring nod.

Jyushi laughed a little in response, his arms tightening around me before pressing his lips against mine, the angle making my head tilt back and deepening the kiss. We held the tender show of affection for a moment longer before Jyushi pulled his head away slightly, a blush resting on his face as he rested his forehead against mine.

Chapter 42

"I think I can work with this," I looked around the small shaded area. While the trees above were more than enough cover from the sun, I didn't feel comfortable with the wide open sides of the little space that Jyushi had led me to. I could always craft walls or fashion curtains to separate the area from prying eyes, and it was close to a medium-sized freshwater spring that I could use to bathe and wash my clothes.

In my mind's eye, I constructed the walls and imagined them in place to give me enough room to comfortably live, the space about fifteen feet wide in both length and width. The trees and bushes would provide enough materials for a bed, and I wouldn't really need the comforts of society like a dresser or lounge. This island was my home now and I had six nosey roommates to live with.

"Are you sure?" Jyushi leaned down to peer into the secluded area, his orange eyes sweeping around the interior, "There's another one like this a little further in...and I think I remember a nice nesting spot near my home."

"Jyushi, this one will be fine," I laughed as I turned to face him, holding out a hand to take my bags from him, "It'll need some things before I can live in it, but it's a really good start to a home here."

"...you could always stay with me," Jyushi protested as he handed over the bags.

"I don't think the others would appreciate that very much," Taking the duffle bag and food bag from him, I set down the duffle near the center of the area before finding a place to hang the food so that no ground creatures could get to it, "But, this means that with a place selected as my home, I'm officially moved in."

"Really?" His eyes brightened at the change in topic, instantly bringing me into a hug as soon as I stepped out of the shaded area, "Then I can show you

around the island! I can point out all kinds of things to you! Where the springs are, where you can count the stars at night..."

"Actually, Jyushi," I pulled my head away from his chest to look up at him, "I had wanted to see a certain spot in Choro's territory first, if that's okay. There was a picture that I took of your island from the air that I wanted to show you all, but I completely forgot about it until after the helicopter left...Choro mentioned that there was some place similar on the mountain he stays at, and he wanted to show me when I found somewhere to stay."

"The overlook?" Jyushi raised an eyebrow before his expression brightened, "That was one of the places I wanted to show you! We can go head there first, and I'll show you some places along the way."

"That sounds great!" I returned his enthusiasm with a smile, following his lead as he pushed through the underbrush towards the mountain range, "Choro won't be mad if you go into his territory, will he?"

"Just because we have a set territory doesn't mean we can't travel through the others," The reticulated naga laughed, "Everyone can come and go if they want. Our claim just means that this is where we prefer to live."

"Oh, so like a habitat...it's your preferred type of landscape, but you can be found in other places."

"I guess?" Jyushi held a branch up so that it didn't whack me in the face, allowing me to pass under it before letting it go, "We all have springs in our territory, but we visit the other springs if something is wrong with ours."

"Do you visit your brothers?" I stepped over a smaller fallen tree, his tail holding it down as Jyushi slithered over it.

"Not really. We always talk with each other through scent, so there's really no reason to go see someone unless they need help."

"That would drive me mad," Giving a small laugh, I caught myself before I could trip and fall over a hidden root that had jutted up from the rains. Jyushi was quick to react, his hands grabbing my waist and lifting me up

before pressing me to his chest. His arms cradled my knees and shoulders to himself, giving a light nod before moving on.

"Humans are much more clumsy than I thought," The partially-insulting comment was given through a smile, making me think that Jyushi didn't see it as a problem.

"Well, two legs do have the tendency to get caught in things easier," Laying in Jyushi's arms, I felt more at ease as I watched his effortlessly glide over rough terrain that would've undoubtedly slowed me down, thick underbrush with curling roots and vines that were easily pushed downwards, "We have a tendency to have problems with walking throughout our lives, but it doesn't seem like you would have a problem with it."

"On the ground? Not really," He nodded a little bit, his tongue flicking out occasionally, "In the trees is a different matter. Some of us are really good climbers while the others like to stay on the ground. Kara and I like tall trees while Choro and Oso prefer the lower trees. Ichi and Todo don't like climbing at all, and seem to avoid it when they can."

"You're not afraid of falling off of the tall trees?"

"Of course I am, but I have a really strong grip so I'm able to stay up," Pushing through the last of the dense foliage, Jyushi and I emerged onto a rolling plain that was covered in long grass. Despite the smooth look, I didn't question it when Jyushi didn't set me down, my eyes catching a shift in expression as his smile dipped into worry before shaking his head a little.

"Jyushi...?"

"Sorry...I don't like going through this field because there's no cover here," He pressed his forehead against my cheek before lifting his head up once more. Jyushi moved forward through the tall grass, the tips of the blades barely touching my back, "When that white place was being built, this was one of the locations that the humans swarmed. Oso was passing through when he overheard some of them talk about cutting this all down to create a flatter area, and we've avoided this place since."

"I like the look of this area," I hummed softly, "It's like a sea of grass."

I held out a hand to brush over the top of the grass, feeling the blades run across my palm while Jyushi moved through the field. It was a peaceful moment, just seeing the wind blow through the grass in waves, creating ripples that mimicked the waves on an ocean.

"We can come back after you see the overlook," Jyushi gently pressed his forehead against my temple, bringing my attention back to him as we neared the edge of the field. The swaying tall grass gave way to more trees that climbed up the slope of the hills, merging in with the mountain range.

Forging through the sparse ground growth, Jyushi finally set me down when we were far enough from the field, ensuring that I didn't fall when my feet touched the ground. His hand was reluctant to leave mine as he continued to guide me through some rough patches of terrain, helping me climb over some larger fallen trees that had been rotting away for some time.

Before I realized it, Jyushi had helped me climb most of the mountain. The only thing that clued me in to the change in altitude was that it was a little harder for me to breathe.

The air wasn't especially thin as it would normally be on higher mountains, but my panting had become much more noticeable since I wasn't used to climbing at all. I saw a movement of green before I felt someone else take my other hand, seeing the green scales out of the corner of my eye.

"Choro," I glanced over at him to see him smile towards me, "Sorry...I'll get more used to this as I do it more."

"No worries," The smile didn't change as Choro and Jyushi helped me climb the rest of the way, following a small path that had been smoothed out by constant use, "You did really well on your own."

"Jyushi helped me most of the way," Sucking in a breath as I stretched out my back, I looked behind me to see some of the island stretched out below my vantage point, "Whoa..."

"The outlook is a better place to see the island from," Choro laughed a little, "It wraps around most of the mountain, so you're able to see nearly everything."

With one last step, I knelt on the ground and wiped the sweat from my forehead, cursing the fact that I hadn't been doing some kind of exercise when I was at the zoo to keep fit. Taking in a few deep breaths, I regained my composure and stood up, looking out from the natural rock platform to see the east side of the island.

The tail end of the short mountain range ended right near the cliff, the rocky edge carved out over the years by the constant pounding of ocean waves. Blooming into a beautiful green color, the range gave way to the expanse of rolling hills and plains before the thicker jungle swallowed them up, fading near the edges of the island into sandy beaches. Following the edge of the island to the southern part, the jungle splintered into smaller clumps as the sand from the beaches covered the ground and surrounded larger rocks and boulders to create a mock desert. The desert stretched south until it hit the waterline, the sand following the ocean westward until the forest regained its territory.

I could partially see the clearing that had been used as a helicopter landing pad near the area, the small oval patch like a bald spot in the forest. The biome continued until it hit the north side of the island, where the forest gave way to more grass and bushes that resembled an arid plain.

The rock platform was amazing to look out from, not completely encircling the mountain but giving enough space to see most of the island. If it hadn't been naturally forming, I would've guessed that the brothers had made this.

"This is a wonderful view!" The giddiness in my voice was hard to hide, "This is nearly what I saw when we were flying--"

I stopped myself from speaking, straining my ears to confirm what I had thought I heard. Looking back towards the west side of the island, I

shielded my eyes from the sun's glare as I looked out to the horizon, straining to see anything moving against the sky.

"(Y/n)?" Choro settled to the left of me, his eyes moving from my face towards the horizon, "Everything all right?"

"I thought I heard--" My heart fell to my feet as I picked up the familiar thudding noises in the far distance, "That can't be...!"

"(Y/n), you're scared," Jyushi tried to comfort me by wrapping his arms over my shoulders.

"Tell your brothers to hide," I ducked underneath Jyushi's arms, quickly pushing aside the comforting gesture to focus on the nagas survival, "I think Calmine's men are coming back."

"What?" Both nagas raised their eyebrows in confusion.

"But we left them behind. They couldn't have followed us this closely without the nice crew warning us about it," Jyushi looked towards Choro before settling his eyes on my face.

"There's a faster way for humans to move around," I ran my hand through my hair, focusing my gaze back where I had heard the distant whir of helicopter blades, "Helicopters are used to traverse to smaller places, but planes are much faster. One plane can cover the same distance as a helicopter in a fourth of the time...I don't think we were followed, we're being hunted."

A distant speck of dark color interrupted the clear blue sky, and I narrowed my eyes in anger before turning to Jyushi.

"Warn everyone to hide and defend themselves, then find some place where you can be safe," I could see the uncertainty in Jyushi's eyes as he glanced between me and the speck on the horizon, "Jyushi, please...!"

"But what about you?" His orange eyes met mine, "Where will you hide?"

"I'll find some place that I can duck down in until they're gone," I tried to give him a reassuring smile, "Besides, it's not like I can get lost here. You guys can always find me from my scent."

Jyushi shot a nervous look to Choro, flicking his tongue out before sharply glancing down towards the eastern side of the island, "Ichi says that there's a hiding spot that's far enough away from the clearing that they wouldn't think to look for you there. He'll wait for you to arrive."

I followed his stare to see that he was looking towards some of the rocky cliffs, figuring that there were some outcrops that I could hide in, "Okay, tell him I'm heading down soon."

Jyushi quickly gave me a hug before crawling down the mountain towards his territory, his speed fascinating to watch as he disappeared into the trees near the base of the mountain. Choro caught my attention by lightly touching my arm.

"We need to get you somewhere safe, (y/n)," He sounded worried as the helicopter rotor became louder, "We're able to defend ourselves, but you don't have any way to fend them off."

"Not with me, no...I left the knives in my duffle bag," I followed his lead towards the eastern side of the overlook, "What about you?"

"I can hide from anyone," Choro sounded confident, and I already knew that he had potent venom. My only worry was that whoever was coming was going to get killed off. I had no clue how to fly a helicopter, but I definitely didn't want it to be found by the satellites high overhead.

"Of course," I started down the side of the mountain, keeping the rocky shores in front of me, "You don't need to hold back with them, Choro. If they're hostile, remind them that they're trespassing on your family island."

His dark green eyes narrowed while his smile thinned into a nasty sneer, "Of course. We're not going to go so easily the second time around."

Chapter 43

Halfway down the mountain slope, Choro disappeared from escorting me down. I had guessed that he was going to get into a better position to react to whoever it was that was heading right to the island. Crossing from the grassy terrain into the rocky biome, I caught myself from tripping a few times, cursing under my breath before I felt a pair of hands grab at my wrists to hold me up from falling again. Quickly looking up to meet Ichi's dark eyes, I let out a sigh of relief.

"Ichi, where was the place you were talking about?" His hands shifted their grip before leading me towards a cliff flush against the ocean.

"It's where I stayed before Jyushi said that you were nice to him," His tongue rapidly slipped in and out of his mouth while he talked, his eyes darting behind us, "Oso and Todo say that the helicopter hasn't changed its course, heading right for the clearing that we landed at."

"Then...they've been here before," My heart sank into my stomach as Ichi continued to tug at my arm, jerking me around rocks and ducking behind boulders before showing a cave that could easily be overlooked. The entrance appeared to be tucked underneath a fallen boulder, Ichi showing the entrance by squeezing through the gap near the bottom. I lowered myself to my knees and had to crawl on my belly to get in, panting in the darkness before holding my breath to slow down my nervous heartbeat.

"Kara wants me to stay with you, to make sure that you're notified of what's going on and to ensure that you're safe."

"If you want to stay with me, you're welcome to..." I found Ichi's hand in the partial darkness, squeezing it for my own comfort before pressing our sides together, "Tell them that I'm hiding and safe."

"Already done," Ichi's voice grew quieter as his tail loosely curled around my other side, encompassing me in a partial hug.

Oso lightly hissed as he watched the helicopter hover above the clearing, the black-and-red paint offending him. The low tree branches and high bushes were enough to hide him from sight in spite of the high winds from the spinning thing above the helicopter. He noted that it was much smaller than the one that he and his brothers had been stolen in, suddenly unsure if this helicopter was meant to steal them away from the island again. His entire body stilled as the helicopter landed, watching carefully as the sides of the flying contraption opened to reveal three humans. They stepped out and kept low as the rotating thing started to slow down.

"Everyone has their orders?" A male human asked loudly over the sounds of the helicopter, his clothing looking very similar to the kind that Oso saw the hunters in.

"Yeah," A female called out while unfolding a large piece of paper, "Find the rare creatures, mark where they are, and report back."

"Should be an easy job," Another male called out as the noise from the helicopter finally died, "We'll be out of here before sunset and back in Australia before midnight."

'

Hunters. Don't let them leave,

' Oso quickly sent to his brothers, knowing that Todo would move further away and let Choro or Kara move in to take his place. They had wanted one of the brothers here without venom just in case the landing humans were innocent, but humanity always seemed to prove Oso's point...

except for (y/n).

'

In position,

' Kara's scent was strong, carrying some of the anger that he held from being caught in the ambush the first time. Oso let his forked tongue hang out in the air longer than usual, picking up the fainter scents of Jyushi, Ichi, and (y/n) while detecting that they were far enough away that (y/n) wouldn't see what was about to happen. He knew that she would rather not have anyone die, but these humans were trespassing onto his island and he wasn't going to stand for any more visitors that she never vouched for.

His black-and-red eyes watched carefully as the three hunters gathered some kind of equipment from the helicopter, slinging long rods over their shoulders that looked like the weapons he had seen the previous hunters carry. Oso could only guess if they were meant to knock his family out or to kill them if they got too close, but he wouldn't take the chance to find out which kind the weapons were.

'

Todo, move between Ichi and the hunters

,' The eldest naga sent out, slowly following the group as they forged into the jungle while following the footpath that (y/n) had used.

'

Ugh...why me?

'

'

Because Ichi and Jyushi don't have your ability

,' Oso refrained from externally sighing at the stubbornness of his youngest brother.

All of his brothers had some sort of secondary defense: the oldest three had their venom, while the younger three had strengths or abilities that were able to keep them safe from predators. Todo had hypnotic vision, able to mesmerize any living creature that looked into his eyes for a long period of

time. He couldn't command them to do anything, but the prey was more or less immobilized the entire time.

Jyushi's ability was his pure strength, probably coming from the species he was born from, while Ichi never told them what his was. Oso paused when the tracking group stopped near the white building that (y/n) had called 'the lab', barely glancing up to see Kara staring right down at him from his high vantage point. Both nagas were completely still as one of the males pulled open the front flap, the barrel of the rifle swinging inside before he fully stepped into the makeshift building.

There was a tense moment of silence before the female of the group looked down towards the ground near the entrance, crouching down to brush aside some crushed leaves.

"Something's been here recently," She called out, her voice loud in the silence of the jungle. The male next to her immediately looked down at where she was pointing, planting a knee into the ground to get a better look.

"Oh, yeah...one set of footprints, while..." He slowly got up and looked around the area, "I can't tell how many there were, but the grass is much more flat near the entrance."

"Shoe size looks to be..." The female trailed off before an exclamation from within the lab drew the two trackers' attention.

"Dave?" The second male called out.

"There's food missing," The first male shouted, "Someone's been here since we landed a few weeks ago."

"It could be the locality."

"There'd be torn up wrappers and partial crumbs left from whatever would've feasted from it," The male 'Dave' emerged from the lab, "No, whatever took the food took everything with it -- the wrappers, the boxes..."

"Human?"

"Probably," The female swiveled her head to gaze at her surroundings, "but Calmine had just launched the bulletin a few days ago about his collection going missing. Those animals would be dumb to come back here."

"What about the human that vanished with them?" The second male looked towards Dave.

"It depends on which story you want to believe," Dave responded, his gaze shifting to the ground and slowly following a trail that made sense to him, "She either escaped to a different country, was eaten by the creatures, or bred with them."

"Eww," The female laughed as she fell in line behind Dave, "Maybe it's better that she's not in society anymore if she wanted dick

that

badly."

"Bestiality," The second male shuddered, making a disgusted noise.

Oso kept his distance as he trailed behind the tracking group, leaning close to the ground to smell what they had been touching. His tines picked up (y/n)'s scent in the ground, the smell embedded into the footsteps that she had left behind. He silently hissed before sending out a warning that (y/n)'s trail had been picked up, ordering Choro and Jyushi to try and cover up what they could before they were discovered.

The response was just as quick, their scents drifting a little further away.

If he had known that humans could track down (y/n) just by the boots she was wearing, he would've insisted on carrying her everywhere...

'

Oso, they're crossing over where the tree cover is thin

,' Kara brought his attention back towards the treetops, seeing the dense canopy begin to let sunlight more through the leaves. The teal-blue scales

were easier to see as Oso passed underneath his brother, their eyes meeting briefly before Kara retreated towards the mountain overlook.

'

Choro, switch with Kara

.'

'

Towards Jyushi's territory?

' Choro asked for directions before Oso gave the confirmation. At this rate, the trackers needed to be taken out before they discovered where (y/n) had chosen to make her home. Their own dens were hidden enough where a tracker couldn't really locate it without prior knowledge of its location, but (y/n) didn't want to stay with any of the brothers and opted for her own den.

The group of trackers crossed over from the denser trees to the area of the island that had thicker trees spread further apart, making it harder for any naga to observe the group from the canopy undetected. The underbrush thickened as well, providing more cover for Oso as he flattened his body out a little more, the top of his scales barely brushing the underside of the bush leaves.

'

In place. On your mark

,' Choro's scent was strong, coming from close by. Oso flicked his dual-tone hues upwards to see a long length of vine trail between the branches of a tree nearby the humans. Following the vine over towards another tree, he spotted Choro's relatively thick length of tail loosely wrapped around a lower branch while his human-like half was hidden behind the tree.

Dark green met black-and-red and both nagas moved at the same time, closing in on the tracking party that had stopped to confirm the direction (y/n)'s footprints went.

Choro hit the group first, the second male falling to the ground and letting out a primal scream as he was dragged away, the large underbrush hiding where he was being pulled to and only showing the shaking leaves that he hit when going past them.

Oso was close behind, grabbing Dave's ankles and violently pulling him away from the female, his speed unimpeded from the terrain. The human tried to kick his way free, shouting obscenities at the naga before Oso felt a sharp stab near his upper tail, looking down to see the hunter had sunk a knife deep into his flesh.

Quickly ensuring that they were far enough away from both the female and Choro with his prey, Oso flung the human against a tree, hissing loudly while rearing his full 'standing' height. The knife stung like crazy in between his scales, but he needed to leave it in. Pulling it out would more than likely cause an amount of blood to be lost, and Oso didn't need that handicap in this fight.

"Whoa...you're a big fellow, aren't ya?" Dave recovered quickly, standing up and holding out both of his hands. Oso narrowed his eyes, seeing that this human didn't regard him as an intelligent creature, "We're not here to hurt you..."

"Says the human whose knife is stuck in my scales," Oso didn't bother to hide the irritation in his voice. The human in front of him would die, either by venom or by strangulation.

"Okay...you can talk," Dave seemed taken aback, one of his hands quickly pressing against the rifle still slung over his shoulder, "There wasn't anything about this in the contract."

Oso ignored the growing pain in his upper tail, taking in deep breaths and watching Dave's movements closely.

"We're here just to see your island, big fella."

"You've seen it. Now leave."

"Gladly, we'll get off your home as quickly as we can after we confirm that it's only just you and your family here," Dave's hand shifted around the metal contraption near the end of the rifle, pausing in his movement when Oso parted his lips and released a loud hiss.

"It's only me and mine here."

"I can't take your word for it, unfortunately," The human shrugged his shoulders before swinging the weapon around to face Oso, the naga just as quick at pressing down to the ground and lunging forward. A loud crack partially deafened his ears, the annoying ringing not dissuading his fangs from sinking into the human's right shoulder.

Dave screamed in agony as Oso bit down harder, feeling his two-inch-long fangs pierce through something hard in the human's shoulder. The naga held back from injecting the venom, his jaw clamping down around the shoulder while his tail quickly wrapped around his prey, locking his legs into useless angles while pinning his arms to his chest. The rifle was stuck between the hunter and the naga, but Oso knew that he had the upper hand in this position.

Dave struggled to break free before Oso violently twisted on the ground, rolling into a serpentine death roll that slammed both of them into a nearby tree. The impact was softened by Oso's tail, but Dave's head was unlucky in its placement.

The rifle went off again, completely deafening Oso's right ear as the muzzle rested near it. In surprise, Oso bit down harder and felt the venom sac constrict before the familiar feeling of fluid rushing through his fangs warned the naga that it was too late to stop the flow.

Releasing his grip on the human, Oso pulled his fangs out and retreated to a safe distance while Dave struggled to his feet, a hand pressed against the bite wound while a glare was levelled at the naga. The human let go of the rifle, his expression shifting to confusion as he looked down at his own trembling hand.

"Venom..." His words grew heavy as he looked back at the naga, confusion melting into anger once more, "You bastard...!"

Oso watched with a neutral expression as Dave fell forward, his hands reaching for something in his pocketed vest before he stopped moving altogether. Opening his mouth wide into a yawn, Oso flexed his fangs back into place before gliding a little closer.

"I know you're still alive," He glared down at the human struggling to keep eye contact with him, "You'll remain alive, in a sense, for the next five hours, but your body won't be working anymore. It'll start with your nerves, stopping movement in the first few minutes before the venom starts to eat away at your inner workings. You'll struggle to breathe for a little bit, before you stop breathing completely."

The glare that the human was giving him was satisfactory, drawing a smirk to the naga's lips.

"You were the one that came back here. This is all your fault," Oso looked back towards where he had dragged the pitiful creature from, his tongue flicking out before slipping back in. Confirming the direction, Oso moved away from the soon-to-be-paralyzed human, "Enjoy your agonizing death, monster."

"Let me go!" The second male struggled against Choro's hands, using the butt of the rifle to hit the appendages. Choro laughed to himself as he dragged the man away from the other two, hearing the screams of both the female and other male in the distance before stopping, watching carefully as the human kicked his feet out of the naga's 'loose' grip.

The human panted heavily from the screaming as he stood up, quickly aiming the barrel of the rifle at the green naga, "You...fucking freak...!"

"Hmm, tell me something I don't know already," Choro's smirk tightened more as the human stared at him in shock, "I've been called a lot worse by those friendlier than you."

"...talk...you can talk..."

"As can you. Now that we have that out of the way, I'm going to ask that you and your ilk kindly leave my home so we can stay here in peace," Choro hated being polite, but he knew that (y/n) would rather him try to peacefully get the intruders to leave before resorting to violence. He would only try this once for (y/n)'s sake.

"There's...another human here that we were ordered to bring back," The human stuttered before adjusting his grip on the rifle, his aim becoming more sure, "We were just following their footprints, and weren't going to do anything to hurt them."

"Ah, my human," Choro felt his hearts flutter at the declaration, knowing that his brothers would take offense at the verbal claim, "You're not taking her anywhere."

"Oh my god...you're actually fucking her," The male seemed to retch in his mouth, the rifle dropping a little as he coughed hard, "That's so disgusting...!"

"You force animals to breed for your enjoyment, but seeing someone claim their mate disgusts you?"

"The fuck are you talking about?"

"Dogs, cats, gerbils, rabbits..." The naga listed off different species that he heard from a conversation outside of the cage back in 'Ahmericuh', two women bragging about pets being bred for money and wondering how much Choro's spawn would sell for, "

That's

a disgusting practice, if you were to ask me."

The rifle aimed back at Choro's head, making the naga duck down before a loud crack echoed out, a sharp sting pulsing in his left shoulder. Choro hissed in pain, falling back behind a tree and climbing it rapidly, keeping

the thick tree between him and the human. When he was a safe distance off of the ground, he pressed a hand against the wet wound in his shoulder, clenching his teeth through the pain before he heard a faint 'bang' in the distance. Smelling out scents would be useless with a freshly bleeding wound interfering with his scent glands, but he could still ask for help from the brothers close enough to get there quickly.

Choro glanced around the edge of the tree to see the hunter running back towards where the female was, gritting his jaw in frustration and diving back down to the ground. The wound bled freely as he moved his left arm, but he needed to keep the humans from regrouping.

Swiftly ducking underneath the thick underbrush, the green naga closed in on the clumsy human, surging forward and wrapping him up tightly in his coils as they both fell forward from the momentum.

"Dammit, no!" The human opened his mouth and bit down on Choro's hard scales, the motion feeling more like a loose pinch on his natural armor than the sharp bite he was obviously intending.

"That's not how you bite your prey."

Choro opened his mouth and flared his two-inch-long fangs before clamping down on the human male's neck, the only exposed flesh from the hold he had on the human. Constricting the muscles above his venom sack, Choro stopped any venom from flowing into the bite. His fangs pierced something hollow, probably the esophagus, but he didn't care about it much. He was told that humans were both durable and fragile, able to live through devastating injuries but prone to multiple injuries at once. Seeing (y/n) after the humans intruded in Ichi's cage had proven that to him.

"No...please...don't kill me!" The man's voice tightened, the scent of blood thick in the air. Choro's dark green eyes shifted to look up towards the man's face.

"Why not," It was hard to speak with his fangs embedded in the male's throat, but the words were still audible.

"...I have a family at home," The human started to sob, the salty tears running down his cheeks and running across Choro's lips. If he wasn't in a fight to the death, he would've let go from the disgusting taste alone, "They need me to support them..."

Choro narrowed his eyes in anger, biting down harder and allowing a little bit of venom to flow through his fangs. Releasing the man with a growl, Choro shoved him down to the ground, his hands pinning his head and right shoulder to the leafy floor while his tail looped over the man's legs.

"I have a family to protect, but you don't see me begging," His voice dropped the growl as he shook his head, "The difference between you and I is that I'm going to move away from this alive."

The human struggled to say something, the blood trailing from the neck wound starting to ebb as the flesh started to swell. Panic was evident in the man's eyes.

"You'll feel dizzy for a little bit before your chest starts to hurt," Choro calmly released his grip on the man, pressing a hand against the wound in his own shoulder before looking at it, "It'll start to get hard to breathe afterwards, and then you won't be able to breathe at all."

The man reached out and tried to grab at some of Choro's tail scales, his fingernails dragging down the armored keratin without scratching the surface. The naga simply looked down at him in anger.

"I gave you a better death than my brothers would've given you, monster. Take it without complaining."

Chapter 44

Oso took in a staggered breath as Choro re-emerged from the dense jungle, watching his younger brother carefully and focusing on the small wound plainly seen on Choro's left shoulder. Choro wiped the pad of his thumb across his bottom lip, removing a small bit of blood that remained after the bite as his eyes glanced down at Oso's upper tail, easily spotting the knife still embedded in the oldest's side.

Neither commented about the other's injuries, focusing instead on the empty area that the female hunter used to be located.

"Have a guess at where she went?" Choro raised his dark green eyes to meet Oso's black-and-red dual hues.

The oldest let his forked tongue hang out in the air before quickly pulling it back in, flinching and coughing as a foul odor clung to his scent organ, "Augh, what the--?!"

"Scent canceller of some kind?" Choro looked around the ground to try and find footprints. If she had rubbed some kind of strong smell in the area, their tongues would be useless until they were out of range of this place.

"Guh, it tastes like rotten flesh..." Oso spat, "Damned human..."

"If we can't smell, then we don't know what the others are saying."

"Let's move towards the overlook," The red-headed naga began moving towards the mountain range, the younger brother following his trail out of the foul-smelling area, "The longer we stay here, the less useful we'll be to the others."

"Did you want to keep the knife in, Oso?" Choro questioned after a moment of silence, "If (y/n) sees you with it still in you, she'll probably have a panic attack..."

"Leave it for now...I don't know how much blood I'll lose when I take it out," Oso groaned as he tried to keep the wounded area immobile, "When the female is taken care of, I'll tend to it."

The trees started to thin in size as the incline grew more steep, the sunlight passing through the canopy overhead as the two nagas forged forward up the mountainside. An eerie silence had followed them since they had left their prey suffering, the silence slowly shifting into an uncomfortable feeling that made them feel that they had forgotten something.

Breaking through the treeline first, Oso was hit with the scent of absolute panic.

'

Two hunters!

' Ichi would've been screaming if the words were verbal.

'

Where?

' Oso returned as quickly as he could, pushing past the foul taste still clinging to his tongue.

'

Cliff!

'

Oso looked back at Choro, both of them wearing confused expressions on their faces. It should've taken the hunters at least another hour or so to move to that side of the island from where the helicopter was, let alone come close enough to Ichi's hiding spot. The eldest glanced over his shoulder to look at where the clearing was, estimating that a trek straight to the cliffs should've taken the humans another hour or two.

Something was clearly wrong.

'

Hide. Help is on the way,

' Kara's scent was the closest to the cliffs, closely followed by Jyushi's affirmative response.

There was no response from their brother.

Ichi's hisses were loud in the nearly closed-off cave, his tail tightly wound around me as I fought to stay awake from the tranquilizer racing through my system.

The attack had happened too suddenly, giving Ichi and I barely any time to react to the rifle that poked its barrel underneath the boulder. I had shoved Ichi down to the ground when I realized that it was aimed right at him, confused at the blind firing but more worried that the rifle contained a bullet.

The rifle went off and I felt something hit my right breast, feeling a needle dig itself into the mammary before a wave of cold washed over my body. Ichi instantly wrapped me up and backed into a far corner of the cave, his mouth opening in a violent hiss as the rifle holder squeezed themselves underneath the boulder.

The sunlight from the slim opening revealed a male humanoid figure, his fingers quickly loading the rifle while his head swiveled around to look at the area.

"Dammit..." The male groaned as he raised the rifle to aim at Ichi, the naga shoving me back against the cave wall and backing right up against me, "The damn thing's got the human."

"Well, shoot it," A female's voice sighed from outside the cave, "Dave and Ben are gonna want to bring her back for questioning, and it's not like the

nagas can leave the island."

"They'll take care of the two that you saw?" The man muttered as he took another step into the cave before a light click was heard, a bright beam of light flashing over my face before settling on Ichi, "Monster doesn't seem to be venomous...corn snake variant."

"Then shoot it, Paul!" The female sounded impatient, "The most it'll do is bite you. It's not like you'll die from it."

"Right..." 'Paul' aimed the rifle at Ichi while holding the flashlight steady, "Nighty-night."

I barely flinched at the second ricochet in the cave, hearing Ichi cry out in pain before letting out a screech when a third gunshot went off. Ichi's coils loosened slowly before he fell to the ground, a breathy whine echoing from his throat as he tried to keep up an intimidating appearance.

Two metal tranquilizer darts stuck out from his shoulder and chest, matching the one that hung from my bust. I sucked in a breath and tried to rip them out of him before the medicated liquid inside could be administered, watching as my fingers fumbled against themselves while my muscles started to completely relax.

"...Ichi...stay awake..." My tongue felt heavy as someone grabbed my left arm and dragged me away from the barely-conscious naga, "...Ichi!"

"Got the girl," Paul called out as he tossed me down near the entrance, feeling someone else grab at my pants leg that was near the opening and dragging me out. I held eye contact with Ichi as long as I could before I was blinded by the sunlight, feeling myself hauled over someone's shoulder.

"Let's get out of here. We marked where their dens and hiding places are the last time we were here, so we know where to look on our next go-around," The woman holding me stated, "They'll be down two nagas, anyway. It'll be an easy hunt to reclaim them."

"If you say so," Paul sounded closer before I felt a sensation of vertigo, my mind losing the fight with the tranquilizer. I opened my mouth to call out Ichi's name, but nothing came out as my vision faded to black.

Kara stilled as he came close to where Ichi's and (y/n)'s scent were the strongest, picking up two new smells that had been identified as the intruders. Peeking around one of the larger boulders in the area, his pupils widened as he recognized (y/n)'s limp form over the female hunter's shoulder, smothering a hiss in his throat as he maneuvered to where he could intercept the humans walking away from the cave Ichi had mentioned.

Ichi wasn't responding to any calls made to him, but his passive scent hadn't left the area.

"You think that nature had a field day when spawning these things?" The male commented as he lay the rifle across his shoulders, "A red-headed krait, a green mamba, and now a corn snake. The fuck is next, some kind of other snake that's nonvenomous?"

"Whatever comes after us is gonna let us walk away," The female laughed as she adjusted (y/n)'s body on her shoulder, the movement not drawing a single complaint from the human Kara and his brothers loved.

"I think you're both mistaken about who's walking away from here," Kara commented while maneuvering around the nearby rocks, cutting off their path. His copper eyes quickly took in (y/n)'s condition, noticing that she was still breathing despite her limp form.

The male human raised his rifle to aim at Kara's chest, "Back off, naga. We've already taken care of three of your kind."

"Shooting my little brother while he was defending someone precious to us," The viper naga barely nodded in acknowledgement, "It must've been quite a feat -- taking down a defensive creature that was cornered and surprised. How about you try it with me? I think I'll offer a bit more of a challenge."

The male adjusted his aim a little higher and fired as Kara swiftly dodged around a boulder to rapidly close in on the male human. He opened his mouth, letting out a hiss and letting his fangs fall into place before his eyes caught a quick burst of movement from the female, pulling back a little as his eyes narrowed on the sight of the female human holding a smaller weapon against (y/n)'s head. (Y/n) didn't flinch at the contact, her eyes remaining closed while the female human held her neck in the crook of her inner elbow, partially choking (y/n).

"Now, now, naga...You've said that this girl is something special to you all, which is why we are going to be borrowing her for a long while," The female snarled, "Do anything funny and she won't come back."

Kara clenched his jaw tightly, hissing as the male leveled the rifle at his head. He knew that Jyushi was close -- he just had to buy a little more time before the younger brother's brute strength could enter the fight.

"Then let me give you a fair word of warning if you want to leave this island," Kara didn't take his eyes off of them, cautiously circling them and opening up their backs to the forest where Jyushi's scent was strengthening, "You're better off leaving the lady there and running back to your helicopter before all of us come to this spot."

"Sorry, but no," The female sneered as she pressed the smaller weapon more into the side of (y/n)'s head, "Our boss was pretty clear on what our job was."

"You heard her, Jyushi," Kara switched his focus from the humans to the towering serpentine figure of the albino reticulated naga behind them, his orange eyes wide and locked onto (y/n)'s form in the female's arm.

The male screamed in fear, raising the rifle and firing wildly.

The sound set off a chain of actions, starting with Jyushi lunging down towards the male with both of his hands extended. Grabbing fistfuls of the man's hunting vest, Jyushi hissed as his mouth opened wide before clamping down on the screaming man's face. The sight of hhim being eaten alive made the female drop (y/n) in shock, turning to try and help her male

partner before Kara closed in, his hands grabbing the arm that held the smaller weapon and twisting it around.

The woman yelled in pain as her arm was wretched behind her back, the momentum forcing her to fall forward next to (y/n) as Kara pushed her down faster with his entire weight behind the shove. Ensuring that (y/n) wasn't in the way of immediate harm, Kara shifted one of his hands up to the female hunter's hair and grabbed a fistful, twisting the strands around his fingers before pulling the hunter back up into the air. Her feet dangled above the ground as Kara rose to his full standing height, his copper eyes dancing over her writhing figure as the male's scream slowly died.

Jyushi stared at the silent male slumped over in his hands, growling as he felt the human's heartbeat race underneath his skin. He had pulled the human out of his mouth to interrogate him, but the human was much weaker than he anticipated. Dropping the male onto the rocky ground, Jyushi looked back at (y/n) before glancing up at Kara.

"Is she...still alive?"

"They must've knocked her out. Ichi isn't responding, either," Kara refused to budge as the woman kicked backwards, her booted heel colliding with his upper tail, "Do you think it's that stuff that the doctor lady gave to Choro and Todo?"

'

Where's (y/n)?

' The strong worried scent of Oso carried on the wind, drawing both nagas' attention towards the overlook. Kara was the first to respond.

'

Unconscious but safe. Should we kill the hunters?

'

A few seconds passed before a wave of rage hit both brothers, answering the question without words. Shifting their focus back towards the humans in front of them, the nagas gave a small sneer to each respective human.

"Let go of me, you stupid bastard!" The female kicked at Kara's upper tail again before he reminded her that her hair was still very much in his grip, a cry of pain shutting her up quickly.

"Since you're at my mercy for a small amount of time while I think of how to kill you, let's see what my brother wants to do with your companion..." Kara forced her head to look towards Jyushi and the unconscious male, her hands frantically trying to reach Kara's as the reticulated naga moved closer to the male.

"No, stop!" She screamed out as Jyushi picked up the male like a ragdoll, holding him up by the back of his shirt, "You want us gone? We'll leave!"

"You said that your boss was clear on what he wanted you both to do," Kara resisted rolling his eyes, "If I let you go, then there's no guarantee that you'll just leave without causing any more trouble. I doubt my five brothers would let you live once your feet touch the ground."

"...five...? There should only be...four of you left..."

"Oh, you thought that your other companions killed two of us?" Kara pulled her closer to him, his lips brushing against the fabric of her clothing while his hands ensured she wasn't going anywhere, "We're a lot stronger than you think."

Jyushi laughed as his tail curled around the male human, completely wrapping him up before relaxing his torso against his coils, "You both hurt (y/n). I'm not letting you get away with that."

"You're all male, right?" The female sounded panicked, "Let Paul go and I'll let you all do whatever you want to me, okay?"

There was a brief silence before Kara gave a small huff of a laugh, his narrowed copper eyes locking onto her face.

"We were going to do that to you anyway."

Kara relaxed his fingers, letting the female drop to the ground roughly before following her down and holding himself over her figure, his tail ensuring that her legs were trapped while his hands pinned her wrists above her head.

A different form of cry sounded from the female's throat, almost sounding heated despite the recent declaration.

The viper naga partially closed his eyes as he looked down at her, watching as her cheeks flushed with red and hearing her breathing hitch for a moment before lowering his lips to her neck. His forked tongue darted out and swiped over her dusty and sweaty skin, a gasp pulling itself from the female.

"You can...do what you want..." The female reiterated.

"I know," Kara responded before opening his jaws and swiftly locking his fangs into place, biting down hard on her trachea before the female knew what happened. Digging his fangs deep into her flesh, he felt something shift before a strangled cry clawed its way out of the female's lips. His eyes narrowed with anger before letting a few small drops of venom leak out into the bite, releasing his teeth from her neck before pulling her left forearm close to his mouth and biting down once more.

The female's blood made Kara's senses murky, an overwhelming scent of iron flooding his mouth as he kept biting down on her arm, unleashing some more venom before pulling away. She was screaming in pain underneath him, letting out as much sound as she could with a crushed throat. Kara debated on biting her again in one of her legs before thinking against the action, partially satisfied with what he had done.

"Only twice?" Jyushi asked from his self-made lounge, "I would've torn her apart..."

"You're welcome to do that with him," Kara motioned towards the male, wiping his bloody mouth with the back of his hand while moving off of the

female.

She was injected with enough venom to kill several humans, a slow death that would eat away at her skin and flesh before she succumbed to the necrosis the wounds would cause. The female wasn't in any kind of position to threaten the nagas or (y/n) anymore.

"I could..." Jyushi dragged on before looking down at his own prey, "I haven't torn someone up in a while, but I don't want to scare (y/n) whenever she wakes up."

"For some reason, I don't think that she'll mind if you did it to protect her," Kara gently took the limp (y/n) in his arms, lifting her off the ground and settling his tail into loose loops underneath her. Cradling her head against his chest, Kara settled both of them onto his coiled tail while ensuring that she wasn't facing Jyushi, just in case she woke up while he was doling out his punishment.

"She's...still alive, right?" Jyushi's tone softened.

"I wouldn't be calm if she wasn't."

Jyushi thought about Kara's response before shifting his attention back towards the male wrapped in his coils, "I'll make this quick..."

Chapter 45

I groaned as I raised a hand to my head, my fingers pushing up into my hair as the limb reached further than I wanted it to. The tips of my fingers hit cold skin, making the ground underneath me flinch a little at the contact before I felt a soft rumble.

"Awake?" Someone with blue hair leaned over me, blocking out the darkening sky as an orange glow cast a gentle light on the person's features. The person was definitely a male, his copper eyes catching the light and reflecting it in a captivating pattern, "You were knocked out for a while. Do you remember what happened, (y/n)?"

"I...think so," I clumsily sat up, finding myself tucked within a large snake tail. Instead of freaking out at the abnormally large creature, I calmly looked back to the man, "Kara...what happened to Ichi?"

"Ichi is alive," Kara gave a reassuring smile as his hands kept me steady while I moved, more of my surroundings coming into view, "Todo was told to keep him comfortable, but he said his own injury was starting to annoy him."

"The gunshot...right," Another groan slipped past my lips as a rush of static cascaded through my skull, Kara's hands tightening on my shoulders as I almost fell backwards, "Damn it..."

"We...uh...tried to remove the thing hanging from your...chest," Kara stammered a little as I looked down, seeing the aforementioned dart still clinging to me through my shirt, "We didn't know how to take it out without hurting you, so we left it in."

"No, that's...fine," I felt my face heat up before I clenched my jaw, gripping the dart tightly and twisting out the barbed needle while pressing my other hand around the skin so it wouldn't have much give. Muttering a pained 'ow'

as the barb was ripped free, I tossed the dart away and pressed hard over the small pierce wound to try and stop the inevitable bleeding quickly.

"There's...also something that I was told to not tell you."

Kara's wording caught my attention, drawing my colored hues up to his copper orbs.

"Oso...was stabbed and Choro was shot by one of the hunters," The viper naga glanced away briefly before looking back, "Todo's and Ichi's wounds haven't worsened at all, but I'm...concerned about Oso. The knife went pretty deep."

"I don't have the skills for repairing a knife wound...!" My voice hitched in my throat as I turned to face Kara, crawling off of his coils and viewing him straight on, "Where is he?"

"He's talking with Jyushi," Kara's tongue darted out between his lips, "By the shoreline, but I don't think -- (Y/n), wait!"

I bolted from my spot, running towards the shoreline that was nearby the rocky area. I had seen some of it on my way here, simply following the sound of water hitting the island in the growing dark of evening. Something sounded right behind me before I was swiftly picked up, the blue scales hard to see in the dark.

"(Y/n), stop!" Kara shifted his grip so I couldn't struggle out of his arms, his panicked voice mimicking my own emotions, "Don't go looking for them!"

"You just said that Oso has a deep knife wound and that Choro was shot. Why should I not go running to them?!"

"Because they didn't want to worry you!"

"Of course I'm going to be worried about you guys, even for the smaller things!" I locked eyes with Kara over my shoulder, "I love you all."

The statement made his eyes widen a little before his grip softened as he pressed his forehead against the back of my neck, "I know you do...We love

you, too, but give us some room for our pride. To see the one we love running to us in fear and worry is disheartening, especially when we were wounded in order to protect you. The injuries aren't anything that we want to be ashamed of...and seeing you worried makes us fear that we made the wrong choice."

I stilled in Kara's arms, never thinking about how my reaction was perceived by the nagas. I wanted to go to them after they were injured to make sure that they were okay and that the wound was healing, but Kara's words made Ichi's actions make sense after he was stabbed in the zoo.

Ichi didn't want to doubt the choice he made...and while he still allowed me to look at the wound, seeing me worried about the wound must've made him feel worse.

To the nagas, the wounds they received were badges of honor, not scars of an unfair fight. They weren't worried about the consequences; rather, they were more concerned about

why

they were wounded. For me to fret over the wounds would cause them to doubt their actions.

I took a deep breath and leaned my head back, both of our heads touching for a long moment in silence before Kara loosened his grip on me. With my feet touching the ground again, I turned to look back up at him.

"I didn't realize that my worrying was such a strain for you. I wanted to make sure that you guys were all right, that you weren't injured beyond recovery..." I lifted my right hand and cupped Kara's left cheek, his head pressing into my palm as he leaned down a little more, "I'm only human, and I worry about those I love. If my worry makes you all uncomfortable, then I'll curb it."

"You can worry..." Kara returned the gesture, holding his cold hand against my warm cheek, "...just don't smother us with it."

Kara escorted me down to the shoreline, helping me climb down the steeper parts of the beachhead before the ground levelled out into coarse sand.

The moon was barely up in the sky, so my visibility was poor, but I could make out two shapes near the water. One was laying on the shore while the other was in the water, the form disappearing and reappearing while shifting around.

"Guys?" I called out while Kara stayed behind, refusing to go onto the sand and perching himself on one of the larger rocks in the area. Both shapes stilled in their various actions.

"(Y/n)? What are you doing here?" I recognized Oso's voice, the source coming closer as I recognized the pale color of red in the being's hair, "I thought that I-"

"You did, but I still wanted to come," I cut him off as his head lifted to look at Kara, "How's your wound feeling?"

Oso shifted his focus back to me before looking down at his upper tail, and I followed his gaze. There was a rather large incision splitting his scales, the cut about two inches in length, but I didn't see any shininess to it, so I took it as the wound wasn't actively bleeding.

"It's there," He gave a soft laugh, "I kept the knife as still as I could before taking it out. While it hurt, I didn't feel any kind of internal pain that extended beyond the length of the knife."

"That's a relief to hear," I lightly pressed a few fingers above the wound, "I'm glad that it's not bleeding anymore."

"Why don't you go back to Ichi and help him wake up?" Oso lay his hands on my shoulders, pushing me back a little, "Todo is starting to get a little whiny about his babysitting job."

"But what about Choro?" I tried to look around Oso, knowing that the other naga was still in the water.

"Choro is with Todo and Ichi," Oso gave a confident smile, "You can tend to him, too, if you want."

The words put everyone in their place. Jyushi was the one in the water, not Choro, and Jyushi usually rushed me when we were in the same space together.

"Why is Jyushi in the ocean?" I didn't miss the grimace that crossed Oso's face, the look quickly replaced by a pensive expression.

"...He's taking a bath."

"Oso."

"He is!" The red-haired naga spun me around and pushed me towards Kara, "You know how he likes water, so there's no need for--"

"I think I almost got it all off, but could you check my back, big brother?" Jyushi's voice came closer as Oso failed to suppress a groan, "I forgot how

messy

it could get."

"Jyushi, stop--" Oso started, turning to face the younger brother while I twisted back to make eye contact with Jyushi. The reticulated naga's face contorted with surprise before a wide smile spread his lips wide.

"(Y/n)!" With his usual enthusiasm, Jyushi surged forward and picked me up in a hug, his body cold and wet from the swim in the ocean, "I didn't think you would be awake already!"

"Surprise," I laughed a little, feeling my clothes soak in the excess water dripping off his chest and arms, "I only was hit with one dart while Ichi took two, so he'll be out for a while longer."

"I'm happy that you're awake..." Jyushi lowered his head to mine, pressing the bridge of his nose against my left cheek before nuzzling against it for a short second, "Kara kept saying that you were still alive, but you wouldn't move when we picked you up..."

I held my hands to his face, the touch stilling him before he pulled his head away.

"I kept you safe."

"I'm sure that you did, Jyushi. You and every one of your brothers."

"The problem now is that the human who flew the helicopter in is now dead," Oso jumped into the conversation, "We could try to throw it into the ocean, but we don't know how heavy it is."

"Let's leave that problem for tomorrow," I leaned my head against Jyushi's shoulder, feeling him quietly start to purr, "Right now, I'd just like to go sleep the night away and get rid of this stubborn fog in my head from the tranquilizer. I'll take a look at everyone's wounds in the morning when there's light."

"Can I take you back to your den?" Jyushi's voice jumped up in pitch with anticipation.

"Actually...I'd like Kara to escort me back."

"Why?" The three nagas asked as one, Jyushi sounding a little hurt while Oso and Kara were confused.

"I need a reason for speaking to one of you?" I felt myself lower before I put my feet underneath me as Jyushi set me down, "Jyushi said that he may need to finish his bath, and the other four are injured and need rest."

"Ah--" Jyushi looked down at himself before giving a hearty nod, "Yeah, I still need to clean off my back."

Oso shot him a glance before shifting to look at Kara, still curled up on the large rock. Kara returned the look with an expression I couldn't really see in

the dark, the silence growing until Oso sighed heavily.

"Fine," The oldest gave a lazy wave over his shoulder as he moved towards the rocky area, "See you in the morning, (y/n)."

"Sleep well, Oso," I returned the wave, not knowing if he could see it or not. Looking back to Jyushi, I was startled by a pair of cold lips pressing against my right cheek.

"My den is close to yours, so just call out if you need anything," Jyushi's breath caressed my cheek as he pulled away from the kiss, crawling back towards the water and leaving Kara alone with me.

"Shall we?" Kara drew my attention back to him, offering an outstretched hand. I gently took it and he guided me around the few remaining rocks before I felt grass and dried leaves crunch underneath my feet again.

With the last light of day finally disappearing beyond the horizon, I was completely blind to the environment and relied on Kara's senses to guide me away from any danger. There was complete silence beyond the sounds of us walking together, with the rare occurrence of bugs chirping in the night as the night wildlife started their day. Kara made a few sounds like he was trying to speak but didn't know what to say first, his hand tightening around mine every so often.

"Are you..." He found the strength to start questioning, "...okay with us not being fully human?"

"If I had a problem with what you all are, I would've run away from Jyushi when he touched my cheek," I laughed a little, "Just because you don't look like me doesn't mean that I don't love you all any less. If I didn't, then I would've run away, reported to my boss that I had found something, and not tried to save you guys when you were taken from here."

"That's...not really what I meant, (y/n)," Kara gave a nervous laugh of his own, "I meant that...are you okay with..."

Another heavy pause grew as we walked.

"I don't know how to say this gently..." I was about to coerce him to just say what he wanted when Kara continued after taking a breath, "Are you sure that you don't mind the possibility of being our mate?"

"I don't know how naga society works, nor do I know the rules of it. I know what the term 'mate' means, and I know that there are several species of animals that have pairings that humans have called 'mates'. I'm not innocent on what I implied when I said that I loved all of you," I gently squeezed his hand as I stopped walking, feeling his tail rub against the back of my legs before Kara drew close to make sure we could still hold hands, "I just didn't know how to talk about it at the time. I still kinda don't."

"Well...uh...The reason I ask is because there was a female hunter...and she offered up herself to save her comrade," Kara's voice grew softer, "I knew what she was implying from her scent, but after I took care of her, I really started to think about what it would mean for us. We've all talked about it on the flight over when we were awake, but we didn't know how to approach you for confirmation, so we just...left it up to you to bring it up."

"Does...my anatomy bother you?" I tried to pick up audible clues to what he thought would be uncomfortable to talk about. There was the obvious 'we're snakes down there and you're not' talk, but I didn't want to jump straight to that.

"No, not at all!" Kara let go of my hand before embracing me in a hug, "Absolutely not. We've grown to like how you look..."

My face flushed with embarrassment.

"I'm so bad with words..." He groaned to himself before I could see him look right at me, our faces inches away from each other, "We're worried that you may not like

mating

with us. We know what our instincts are telling us to do, but..."

"You're worried that I may not like it when it starts, or even refuse to be your mate at all," I concluded verbally for him. I could see him nod in the darkness, the hug tightening once more as he rested his head against my shoulder. I raised both hands up, placing one on his back while the other ran through his hair, "Kara, I'll be honest...the thought occurred to me long ago that I may like being your shared mate, but I'm worried that it won't be possible. Not because of me not wanting it, but because our species...may not be compatible.

"It's similar to the animals on your island. They only perpetuate with their own species because they can't copulate with those not like them. I know what I said back at the zoo, and it still stands true to this day. I just don't know if we'll be able to."

"Did...you want to try?" Kara's voice lowered, his arms loosening around me a little as he pulled his head away. I closed my eyes and gave a soft smile, not knowing if he could see me in the dark.

"When I'm not drugged up and the time is right, I'd like to give it a try."

Kara gave a relieved huff before pressing his lips against mine, kissing me gently a few times before taking my hand and leading me to my new home.

Chapter 46

The morning sun settled across my eyes as I turned over on my bed, groaning in annoyance as I pulled the blanket over my face. A soft breeze notified me that my bare feet were no longer under the blanket and I quickly tucked my legs in close to me, adjusting my position on the bed to accommodate. The new position quickly became more and more uncomfortable and I tossed off the blanket entirely, stretching out and laying on my back while staring up at the ceiling.

A low canopy of leaves and branches brought me back to reality that I wasn't in civilization anymore, sitting up in the thick pile of leaves and grass that Kara helped me gather in my tired state for sleep.

"...morning..." I yawned to no one as I reached down to pluck the socks that were stowed in my boots, shaking them out to ensure that nothing tried to make a home within the fabric, then slipping them on my feet. I repeated the process for the boots, stepping into them and tightening the laces before standing up and stretching one more time.

Adjusting my clothing, I lifted my shirt up to my nose, wincing at the smell that was starting to accumulate. Considering I had only changed clothes once during the trip back, I was more than overdue for an actual bath.

Undoing the duffle bag near the leafy bed, I grabbed a full change of clothes and a towel, making a mental note to find some way to rig up a drying rack for wet clothes. Looking through my duffle bag to find the toiletries that I had stashed, I sucked in a breath through clenched teeth as I quickly pulled my hand out of the bag.

"Ah, shit..." Glancing at my hand, I saw a thin line of red bead across the length of my thumb, "Right...(Y/n), you've got knives stored in the bag."

Licking off the tiny droplets of blood welling on my skin, I carefully uncovered the four knives that I had stolen from the zoo and set them on the

bed in the partially shredded clothing sheaths. With the dangerous weapons out of the way, I dug back through the bag to bring out the large ziploc bag full of travel-sized toiletries. Picking out the shampoo, conditioner, and bodywash, I grabbed my hairbrush and shaded my eyes from the morning sun as I walked towards the nearby spring.

Jyushi had told me that he rarely comes to this one, since there's a larger spring closer to his den that flows into the river further inland. I pushed aside a large frond to see the spring's reflective surface, seeing that the size was about half the size of my old studio apartment when I was a student.

Placing the fresh clothes down on a fallen tree, I gave a careful look around the perimeter of the spring, gazing at the empty spaces between the trees and bushes to make sure that there weren't any unwanted eyes staring back at me.

I paused in my visual sweep when I made eye contact with two orbs of dark copper, the black scales around the color giving it away who it was.

"Todo," I held back a disappointed sigh, placing a hand on my hip as I tossed the towel over a shoulder, "I thought your den was on the other side of the island."

"It is, but I wanted to make sure that you were...alive," The youngest naga emerged from his 'hiding' place, glancing around the area while letting his tongue flick in and out, "You still need to do my bidding."

"I'm alive and well, but I'd really like to take a bath before I do anything today," I waved a hand towards the spring.

"Well, when you're finished, I've got a few things that I want you to do for me," Todo curled up on his tail and watched me intently, his copper eyes never leaving my figure, "Go on."

"Excuse you?" I scoffed, "I don't want an audience. I'll find you when I'm finished, so leave me alone."

"I don't trust you to come find me," He rested his left cheek on his forearm, still holding eye contact with me, "If it makes you feel better, I'll just close my eyes."

"No, Todo. I don't want anyone here with me. Most humans consider this to be a very solo thing to do, and I'm pretty sure all of us would prefer someone to not barge in when they're in the middle of something they consider to be an intimate process."

Todo's eyes flashed as a soft smile spread across his lips, his torso lifting off his coils before he moved closer to me, "Oh, (y/n)...if you're scared to do it alone, you should've just said so."

His copper hues were dazzling as the sunlight was reflected on the amber flecks deep within the color, drawing my attention to them. A feeling of fear washed over me as Todo lifted his hands to my face, caressing my cheeks with his cool fingers as he leaned over me, our eyes never breaking contact.

"I can help you bathe," His voice took on a soothing tone, almost comforting in a way that fought against the seed of fear that tried to grow in my gut. Something about this was wrong, but I couldn't put my finger on it.

In fact, I couldn't move

anything

.

My lips parted as I tried to speak, trying to tell him to stop whatever he was doing but no sounds were uttered as I felt his fingers slowly lower from my cheeks to my neck, brushing across the neckline of my shirt and sliding down to my hips. I stood there, frozen like a statue, as Todo's fingertips ducked underneath the hem of my shirt, his fingers touching my warm skin as he slowly began to push the fabric up.

I couldn't pull my eyes away from him, or even force them to close. My heart raced in my throat as I felt the shirt gather just under my breasts, Todo starting to touch the bra I was wearing.

"(Y--

Todo!!

" A familiar voice roared in anger, drawing Todo's attention away from me and breaking whatever he was doing to me. I staggered backwards and shook my head to ensure that I had control of my body again, finding my hands empty of both the towel and toiletries. A cacophony of hisses and monstrous screeches sounded in front of me, snapping my focus from where I had dropped what I needed to witness two nagas fighting each other.

The larger of the two was completely encompassing the smaller naga, the black, white, pink, and yellow scales smothered by white and yellow scales. Both nagas had their jaws wide open, teeth bared and ready to strike as they rolled on the ground, the momentum from both fighting for dominance sending them into the spring.

"Jyushi! Todo!" I cried out as I hastily kicked off my boots. I had no business getting into a fight between brothers, much less between two nagas that could easily kill me, but I found myself jumping into the spring nevertheless. The clarity of the water betrayed how deep it actually was, shocking me as the few feet of water that I was expecting turned into a depth of about ten feet.

I swam towards the sinking pair, air bubbles escaping their mouths while they still struggled against each other. Jyushi had the clear advantage with his size and strength, but Todo was somehow holding his own against the larger brother.

Kicking my way through the water, I drew close enough to see both sets of pupils wide and locked onto the other like they were prey. The orange pair flicked up to me before Jyushi closed his mouth, my presence clearly distracting him as Todo reared his head back. I recognized the tell of a strike and was close enough to intercept it, quickly shoving my right arm between Todo's toothy maw and Jyushi's neck.

The water muffled my scream as Todo's teeth sank into my skin, the attacking naga quickly releasing the bite and moving his head away as his eyes tried to visually comprehend what just happened. Jyushi grabbed me in his arms and quickly let go of Todo, his tail propelling us through the water without much effort.

Breaching the water, I took a deep breath as I pressed the bit arm against my chest, watching as Jyushi brought me out of the spring and gently rested me against the tree that held my clothes. His orange eyes swept over the area before leaving to grab something, returning quickly with my toiletries, towel, and a handful of long-stemmed weeds.

"Chew these and hold the mash against the bite..." Jyushi sounded almost panicked, his tongue flicking wildly, "It'll help the bite heal faster."

I merely nodded and chewed on the weeds, their metallic taste flooding my mouth as I watched Jyushi. Our eyes met for a brief moment before he turned to face Todo emerging from the spring, quickly creating a physical barrier around me and my things with his tail.

"Why were you here, Todo," The older of the two didn't ask a question, "You know that this is my territory."

"I know..." Todo sighed as he reached behind his left shoulder and pulled off a wet white patch of cloth, throwing it down to the ground as he shifted his jaw from side to side, "I didn't know how long humans slept, so I wanted to make sure that she was still alive."

"Then why did you offer to help me bathe?" I called out from within Jyushi's coils, "I asked you to leave twice before you did...whatever it was."

"You looked like you were nervous with my presence, so I just wanted to calm you down," The youngest naga sounded upset, "It's not like I was going to do anything to you."

"Her fear said otherwise," Jyushi cut in, "Did you think we wouldn't pick that up?"

"She was just scared of not being able to move. All prey is."

"You were doing something that she clearly didn't want!" The older hissed out a reply, his coils tensing up in frustration.

"I was just taking her clothes off so she could bathe!" Todo hissed back in response, his tone dropping all sense of snobbery, "There's nothing wrong with helping out a mate, is there?!"

"Todo, I didn't want your help! I just wanted to take a relaxing bath after a few stressful months..." I vaulted over Jyushi's tail, landed with my feet securely on the grassy ground, "I even told you that I

wanted

to be alone for it, and you came up with your ridiculous claim that I was too scared to do it alone. I didn't want to be taken advantage of, and I didn't want to be the target of your weird eye thing or your teeth!"

Todo seemed taken aback at my sudden appearance, simply watching as I came closer to him. He didn't make a move towards me, "Would you rather have me come and wake you up to ensure that you didn't die in your sleep?"

"No, I would rather everyone just let me be and allow me to wake up on my own."

"You could've just told me that you didn't want me to see you nude."

"I thought that was heavily implied by me telling you to leave," I narrowed my eyes in suspicion of Todo's change in tone, unsure what he was trying to do.

"You didn't need to shove your arm between me and Jyushi, human."

"You didn't need to bite his neck," I quickly retorted, realizing that Todo was slipping back into his old pattern of bickering, something that he hadn't really done since we were back in the zoo, "Anything else that's completely not your fault?"

"I want you to come to my part of the island after you're finished with your bath," Todo raised himself a little higher, looking down at me, "I've got something that you should be able to do."

Without letting Jyushi or I say another word, Todo turned and disappeared through the foliage where he had emerged from.

I stood in the silence before Jyushi slowly crept next to me, his human half low to the ground as I caught him looking at my arm. Raising it up for him to inspect, I calmly watched as he shifted the weed mash that I made more evenly over the teeth marks, the shape almost perfectly fitting the scars left by Ichi.

"Can...I stay by you?" His orange eyes met mine from the rare low height, his voice gentle as he asked.

"Jyushi..." My eyes softened at his tone, "I appreciate the concern, but I'd still like to bathe...and that means I'd like to be alone for it."

"I didn't look at you when you were washing off the salt water, and I promise that I won't look this time," Jyushi raised himself up a little, releasing my arm before leaning in a little closer, "Every time I leave you alone, I feel like something bad happens to you."

"Did something bad happen when Kara took me home last night?" I gently placed my hand against his left arm, his right hand instantly covering it.

"No..." He glanced away.

"And what about when I was with you all at the zoo?"

"There were a few times."

"And how many of those times that you helped me when you were able?" I lightly rubbed my thumb against his skin.

"All of them."

"That's why I can bathe in this spring with ease. I know that you'll respond quickly if something

does

happen," Dropping my hand from his arm, I watched his lips slowly stretch with his usual smile, "There may come a time when I'll let you be in close proximity when I take a bath, but I need to get used to doing this first."

"Okay," Jyushi's full smile was back, "I'll leave you be, but call out if you need help."

"Of course," I watched as he moved out of the spring clearing, his colored scales becoming harder to see as he moved further away.

I waited until I couldn't hear him anymore before I started regathering my things, bringing the toiletries and towel to the spring edge. Peeling off the wet shirt and pants, I tossed them into a pile nearby before taking off the undergarments. It was definitely a different sensation compared to being in a private bathroom. I knew I wasn't the only one with a mind that could comprehend what I was doing on the island, so that knowledge made my hairs stand on edge before I dove into the spring.

Chapter 47

I sat in the early afternoon sun as I roughly rubbed the towel against my hair and head, drying it off as much as I could before letting the hair rest in the sun's warmth. The pile of wet clothes that I had discarded brought my attention back to them as I looked around the small clearing around the spring, wondering what I'd use to wash them and how I was going to let them dry.

I'd have to find a natural cleaning agent that I could make or simply use raw herbs to get the clothes clean, but I wasn't the botanist that was assigned here. Tell me to look for fauna and I'd have at least fifteen species by the end of the day, but tell me to look for flora and I'd find a common houseplant.

The sun warmed my skin and soaked into my dry clothes, spreading the warmth to where the sun wasn't touching. It felt nice to just sit in the silence after a refreshing bath in a natural spring, even if there were six other beings that clearly wanted me to be with them in a more intimate fashion.

I lowered my eyelids in thought, taking in a breath before slowly releasing it.

Mating

.

How the hell would that work between a naga and a human? I didn't even know if they were more snake-like or human-like

down there

, or where their

down there

even was. Was it closer to the end of their tail, just like a snake's was, or was it close to their waist like a human?

I had made myself not focus on those details when I was initially looking them over back at the zoo because it wasn't something that was a focal point, but I couldn't recall if I saw anything that looked similar to a cloacal scale, or vent, that hid their genitals. If the nagas had a more human anatomy, then maybe it'd be okay...

A blush swiftly formed over my cheeks as an image of one of the nagas was 'locked' with me, shaking my head hard to get rid of the imagery before slapping both of my cheeks to bring my focus back to where I was currently. There was more than enough that I had to do before even thinking about that kind of thing.

I still had to finish my house, find a way to survive with the local food options, possibly rig up a drying rack for clothes and meat, and take a detailed tour of the island with each naga, finding the ins and outs of their territory and where I needed to avoid going on my own. This island was their home, and I'd do myself no favors by just hoofing it on whims and guesses.

My thoughts paused as I stood up, gathering the damp towel and wet clothes before heading back to the rough circle of trees that I called home.

"Are you sure that you want

me

to walk you there?" The viper naga raised an eyebrow in confusion as he lowered himself to the ground in front of me, "That's...going to be a bit longer of a walk to Todo's territory if we go through my area."

"That's fine, Kara," I gave a small nod of my head, "I didn't want to ask Jyushi because he and Todo had a fight recently, but I still want to go to his territory because..."

Kara patiently waited for me to finish my thoughts.

"I feel like I reacted in the wrong way to what he was trying to do."

"I could smell your fear from my den, (y/n)," Kara moved his hand in a wide sweep, offering to walk next to me as we spoke, "It's not unreasonable to think that any of us would react as strongly as Jyushi did."

"It's just that I thought Todo would take my negative answer to his offer with grace, but he seemed to be offended by it and tried to find a workaround where he could still get his way," My left hand rubbed the tender skin of my right forearm lightly, "I want to see if there's a way to talk to Todo, to see if there's an option of us having better communication without either of us assuming something."

"That's quite a tall order for our youngest brother," Kara pushed a branch above my head so I wouldn't get hit by it, "Todo isn't like most of us when it comes to social skills, since he's the one that tends to stay by himself for a majority of the day."

"Then, do you have any clues or hints that would help me?"

"Don't look directly into his eyes," He laughed a little, "You've already felt what he can do, so I'm going to guess that you don't need to be told that."

I gave a short nod.

"Then all I can really say is that you need to be patient with him. Todo tends to react harshly when he thinks something isn't going his way, or will try to overpower the other naga by staring him down. I'm not really sure what he'll do with you, but don't be surprised if he tries to get you to look at him when he's losing his ground."

"He almost sounds like a child," The words were hushed as they passed my lips.

"Well, he is," Kara laughed, "He's only two-hundred-sixteen moons old."

I froze, standing still as Kara continued a few feet before realizing I stopped.

"(Y/n)?" My name went unheard as I quickly realized the nagas measurement of time being the full moon that happened nearly once every month. Two-hundred-sixteen divided by twelve was...

"Eighteen years? Todo is

eighteen?!

"

"I think so," The viper naga gave a smile like he hadn't just dropped a bomb on me, "Is...that a bad age for humans?"

"'Bad age'...Kara, how old are

you

?" I partially mocked him in shock.

"Three-hundred-thirty-six moons."

Twenty-eight years old

.

I stared at him in surprise, my hands barely covering my mouth before I forced them to tuck into my pants pockets. Blinking a few times while taking in a breath, I focused on Kara.

"This is news to me," A soft laugh pulled itself from my throat before I allowed it to grow, laughing for a little while before recovering, "I never once thought to ask how old you guys are! I was just under the impression that you were some kind of being that always existed."

"Well, we all hatched from eggs, but others took longer than some, so we just kinda assumed that the first-hatched was the oldest," Kara moved a

little closer, "Does...our age displease you?"

"No, not at all," I waved my hands in front of my face to dismiss the question, stepping up next to Kara as we began walking again, "It's just...hearing how old you actually are is a bit of a shock."

"You had mentioned a different number than what I said. Is that the humans' way of telling time?"

"Years...yes, it is. We measure time with a strict conversion table. There are seconds, minutes, hours, days, weeks, months, and years. Each one feeds into the next on the table."

"We just count the phases of the moon, since it's constant just like the sun," Kara glanced upwards, the sun beaming down through the thick canopy overhead, "The stars tell us when the seasons are coming, and the sea and sky tell us when to hide from incoming storms."

"What you're talking about sounds like a mixture of what humans call astronomy and meteorology, where you use the sky and sea as time or weather indicators."

"You have weird labels for things that are so simple," The naga shifted his eyes back to me.

"Humans tend to overcomplicate things," I gave an apologetic smile in response, "I promise that I won't try to use big words if they confuse you."

"No, use the words I can't understand," Kara lightly rested his left hand underneath my chin, "I don't mind learning something new."

He leaned down and gave a soft kiss on my forehead, holding it for a few seconds before pulling away and leading me further into the thickening jungle. I followed behind in silence as my right fingers brushed against my forehead, my mind wandering a little as I trailed behind Kara's teal-blue tail.

It was surprising to hear that the nagas were around my age, either younger or older by a few years, but the gap wasn't terribly large.

I lowered my hand to my side as I thought back on everything that had happened within the past year, from landing on the island and finding out that nagas existed, to securing a way to escape and giving the proverbial finger to Calmine. I had never even thought about how old the nagas were, making the mental leap that they must've been nearly a century old or something without proof.

With Todo being eighteen years old, it made complete sense that he would give me an attitude about anything that he didn't want.

I glanced up at Kara, seeing the sunlight through the trees dancing upon his teal-blue hair as he passed underneath the canopy, taking in a short breath before speaking, "Would you be able to tell me how old your brothers are? If Todo is the youngest, then what about everyone else?"

"What was your term for age again? Years, correct?" The naga shifted his gaze back towards me from over his shoulder, his bright copper eyes locking with my own hues.

"Yeah. I don't mind doing the conversion, so it'll be easier to just tell me how many moons everyone else is."

"Very well," Kara gave a short nod, "Oso is three-hundred-seventy-two, Choro is three-hundred-twenty-four, Ichi just passed his three-hundreth moon, and Jyushi will be passing his two-hundred-and-fifty-third moon in a few more weeks."

My mind cranked into overdrive, transcribing the numbers into the human equivalent for years. Oso's number turned into thirty-one, Choro was just a year younger than Kara at twenty-seven, Ichi's age was twenty-five, and Jyushi was barely a legal adult in America's law system at twenty-one.

The ages were more spread out than I originally thought, bringing to light an idea in my head of how they possibly could have acted when they were first hatched. An invasive thought settled in my head about where the eggs

even came from, and wondering if the original creature that birthed them was still around on the island or if it was long gone.

"(Y/n)?"

"Hmm?" I looked up at Kara, pulling myself from my thoughts to see that he had fully turned around to face me, a look of concern resting on his face, "What is it?"

"Are you sure that our ages don't bother you?" The back of his index finger trailed across my cheek as I walked closer to him, closing my eyes for a short moment before holding his gaze, "I've never seen you pensive like this, so I want to make sure that everything is all right."

"No, it's not your ages that are bothering me, Kara," I offered a reassuring smile up at him, seeing his lips partially return it as he pulled his hand away, "This is information that I never thought to ask for before, and it will take some time to process it. It's not bad or anything, just--"

"It took you long enough," A familiar voice cut me off mid-sentence, drawing Kara's and my attention to the newcomer.

Todo was the epitome of impatience as Kara lifted the last of the large hanging branches, enabling me to cross from Kara's territory into Todo's. The youngest naga was lounging on a fallen tree with his tail partially curled around one of the dead branches that pointed up to the sky, his humanoid torso laying against the rotting bark that had been carved out into a seat of sorts while his arms were settled into a crossed position over his chest.

"Sorry, Todo," I offered an apology as I walked through the transition of underbrush, from thick and tall to short and sparse, exposing more of the dirt and fallen leaves, "The delay was my fault, as I kept asking Kara questions about your family."

"Well, you're here and that's all that matters," He shrugged as the naga slipped from his little tree cradle, falling a short distance to the ground before moving away from the territory line, "Come on."

"Todo, wait," Kara called out, drawing Todo's focus to him with a glance over the shoulder, "Don't make her do anything rash."

A huff was Todo's only answer as he continued moving deeper into his own territory. I looked back at Kara with a smile, trying to give him a wave of reassurance before following Todo's trail.

"So, what were these things that you wanted me to do earlier?" I caught a low hanging branch that snapped back at me when Todo shoved it out of his way.

"Just a few light things that I want changed in my territory," His words reminded me of when I nearly sprained my back moving a large boulder in his cage, and when my arm was sliced when he pushed me into his water feature as I tried to clean out the drain, "I've ensured that the chores won't cause any physical harm to you, since they didn't hurt me."

"Hold on," I stopped following him, careful to look at his shoulder blades on his back, "You can actually do the chores yourself, but are still making me do them?"

"What else are slaves for?" Todo barely turned around, "They're meant to do the dirty work that others won't."

"I can tolerate being called a servant or employee, but I want to change what you call me," I narrowed my eyes, watching Todo's body language shift from calm to tense as I spoke. The small hints were obvious now that I was looking for them: the flinch of muscle in his back, the short amount his arms pulled back as he turned around to make his chest push out a little further, and the less noticeable movement of his tail as it swirled underneath him to offer a solid base for a strike.

Keeping my eyes from looking directly into his own, I settled for staring at his chin, "It's a bothersome word for me."

"I'll call you whatever I want,

human

, and I will call you my

slave

," Todo ducked his head down a little to try and catch my eyes, but I was laser-focused on the spot I chose.

"I'm not debating the role that I'm in, Todo. I'd just like for you to choose a different word."

Todo hissed and suddenly lunged forward, making me back up a few steps to keep some distance between us as he clenched his fists tightly by his sides, leering down as I refused to meet him in the eye. I heard him breathe deeply a few times before his threatening posture relaxed, partially surprised at the restraint he was showing. His pink-dotted black hair was pushed back by a hand, his fingers running through the short length before lowering to rub his face, dropping by his side completely after a few seconds.

"Okay, fine..." His eyes dropped from my face, shifting down before looking towards his right, "You want to be called a different term? Fine."

I blinked in surprise, wondering if someone had berated him for how he acted just a few hours ago.

"Hey," His tone turned sharp, bringing my focus back to him and our eyes met. I braced for that uneasy feeling of not being able to move, but nothing overtook my senses like before, "Tell me what you want to be called."

"The formal terms don't seem like anything you'd actually say naturally, so how about 'serf'?" I offered sincerely, knowing that the term was better suited for what he wanted me to do.

"Serf..." Todo tested the word with his lips, slowly pronouncing it before repeating it a little faster, "Serf then. Is a serf something that's prevalent in Ahmericuh?"

"No, it's a term of a dead governmental system, but it applies to my situation much closer than 'slave'. It means someone who works on land that's not owned by them, and considering I don't own this island while you want me to do things in your territory, I thought it would fit," A small sense of relief washed through my nerves as his face shifted from confusion to partial understanding.

"Serf...Very well," Todo turned around and continued deeper into his territory, "We'll start with the lighter things before going to the harder chores."

Chapter 48

I grunted as I hefted a fallen log that was nearly as long as I was tall, struggling underneath its rotten weight as I tried to pull it from the pathway that Todo had wanted cleared. Something began to twinge in my left rib cage, making me grit my teeth before giving one last heave and tossing the log to the ground. The naga moved to where I stood panting, hands pressed onto my sides as I watched him inspect the area.

His copper eyes swept across the pathway that had been cleared while a satisfied look settled on his face, taking a moment to 'stand' in the obstacle-free area.

"And...?" I tried to drag out a verbal response from Todo, catching his eye from over his shoulder. Todo glanced away, looking suddenly more interested in the ground underneath his scales.

"It took you a lot longer than I thought it would," His response was sharp as Todo finally turned towards me with his arms crossed over his chest, "If you're having this much trouble with one of the easier tasks, then I'll have to rethink some of the heavier chores..."

"Todo, I didn't train to be in a weightlifting competition," I let my hands drop, a strained expression flashing in my eyes, "Not many humans can easily lift a fallen tree. The only reason I was able to move the rocks in your cage back at the zoo was because the larger ones were fake."

"I know," He met my eyes once more in a challenge, holding my gaze for a few seconds before looking away while tucking a hand underneath his chin, "Come with me."

"Okay...?" I quickly fell in line as Todo moved down the pathway, both of us travelling deeper into his territory. There wasn't a response to my unasked question as we walked, and I looked at my new surroundings.

When I had been deployed here, this was part of a large chunk of unknown terrain that the previous teams hadn't had the chance to explore. It was a darker part of the island as the canopy nearly swallowed the sunlight with its thickness, and the undergrowth shifted from the larger bushes to smaller, but more diverse, foliage. Vines crawled up the thinning trunks of trees before spreading their fingers amongst the higher branches, adding to the dense cover.

I was reminded of the time when my stomach began to protest my choice of not eating anything since my bath.

"How often do you need to eat?" Todo barely turned around to acknowledge what he definitely heard.

"When I had a steady supply of food, I ate up to three times a day," I resisted rubbing my stomach at the thought of some favorite foods I no longer had access to, "But with these conditions...as long as I have a steady supply of freshwater, I can go five or six days without eating. Anything longer and my body will think I'm starving...and that's not a phase I'd like to get to."

"Why?" Something I said caught Todo's attention, halting his progress and making him fully face me.

"Well...my body will start eating itself. It's a slow process and can be slowed further if I have water throughout the day, but..." I closed my eyes against the thought of me wasting away in front of the nagas, "I'll get thinner with each passing day as my body eats up fat and muscle when there's no more energy stores left to feed from. There haven't been any studies done on exactly how long a human can survive without food and water, since it's in the 'illegal human experimentation' department, but there are quite a few guesses that a human can't survive past a month -- two months at most -- without food."

The pattoni naga simply stared at me, the quiet nearly unsettling as his copper eyes swept over my face.

"Then we should do the other tasks first..."

Without another word, Todo grabbed my hand and dragged me a few feet before I caught my footing, following as well as I could without stepping on or near his tail.

"Todo, wait! Where are we going?"

"Why didn't you tell us that you were so

fragile

?" Todo's hand tightened around mine, his fingers almost inlacing my own in his apparent frustration, "We could've helped you with this..."

"Todo, it's only been a day since we landed--"

"And four days since you had the chance to eat anything!" His eyes held mine over his shoulder, worry plainly seen on his face.

"I ate a little bit of the food that I found at the lab yesterday, so I'm not in imminent danger of starving."

"And one day that food will run out. You'll need to know what to look for out here," Todo's tongue flicked out, his pace slowing a little before turning to the right and cutting through a large bush that was overgrown, "Since you're already in my territory, I'll show you what's possibly safe."

"Why 'possibly'?" I asked, an eyebrow raised in concern as the naga dropped my hand.

"Just because I can eat it doesn't mean it's safe for you to eat," He pointed towards several smaller bushes that were almost the height of my waist, "Those are a bit tart, but they haven't poisoned me yet."

I squatted down, reaching out to grab a small handful of the small black orbs hanging from the bush stems. The berries were firm and I dared to pop one into my mouth, chewing it slowly before a wave of tartness flooded my tastebuds. I recoiled a little before vocalizing my surprise.

"Blackcurrants...!" Smothering a cough, I laughed as I tossed a few more into my mouth, "It's been a long time since I've had these. These're completely safe for me to eat, Todo."

I looked up at him with a smile, only to see him flinch back a little before looking away from me, a small redness spreading across his cheeks.

"Good. There's a lot in my territory, so make sure to harvest the berries when you need them."

I paused from moving, slightly narrowing my eyes to ensure that I saw the flushed red on his cheeks. Todo closed his eyes before looking back at me, opening them again when his face was pointed right at me. A look of shock crossed his face when he realized I was still looking at him, recovering quickly as a small frown pulled at the corners of his lips.

"Something on my face?"

"Possibly...I'm pretty confident that I saw you blushing," I stood up with a smile resting on my lips, taking a step towards him, "It's a new look."

"I was not," He reared his head away from me, the frown spreading into disgust, "You might be hallucinating from the berries."

"It's not the berries, Todo. I know what I saw," I reached out and took his hand as he started to turn away from me. Todo froze at the physical contact, his hand and arm tensing up, "Todo, just let me ask one question..."

He didn't say anything, only moving his head slightly towards me to meet my colored hues with the corner of his left eye. The blush was more prevalent as it started to touch his left ear.

"This morning -- at the spring," I shifted my grip to hold his hand more properly, my thumb rubbing against his, "Were...you really meaning to help me, or were you wanting to try something I didn't want?"

Todo closed his eyes for a moment, turning back around to face me while opening his copper eyes and standing his full height, towering over me by a

few feet. Despite having the shortest length among the brothers, he was still a snake that could hold himself up with less than half of his tail on the ground. His hand dropped mine as he moved and I took a step back, unsure of what his intentions were.

"(Y/n), I didn't mean to make you scared this morning," The naga spoke slowly, as if he was thinking of what words to say before he spoke them, "I thought that you were just...putting on a defensive face because I was caught watching you. I -- well, all of us -- have never seen a human bathe before, so I was...more curious about what you did than anything else. When you had a change of clothing in your hand, I had simply thought that you just needed to...put the new ones on and that was how you bathed.

"Since we mostly go into the water to swim, I thought it was the same way for you...but I was wrong. It was wrong of me to use my ability against you, and I won't do it again," Todo lowered himself down as he spoke, eventually reaching my eye level, "I'm sorry."

An apology certainly wasn't what I was expecting from the youngest naga when I asked the question. I had started thinking of retorts that I could use when he started to banter back and forth with me about what he

definitely

didn't do wrong, so hearing him say 'I'm sorry' left me flabbergasted.

"I also want to apologize for...my behavior at the zoo," Todo continued, taking my silence as clearance to keep talking, "I had been stolen during the early hours of the morning, when I was tired and unable to fight back. The humans had treated me roughly, so when I saw you open that small cage that I was chained up in...I wanted to get the upper hand with you. My brothers warned that if I charmed you, though, they'd make sure that I'd suffer while we were captive."

I blinked a few times, thinking back to the first conversation I had with Todo, "I didn't hear them say anything like that."

"Their scents spoke louder than their words to me," He glanced to the side, the faint sunlight catching the amber flecks in his irises, "Jyushi was the one who was more forceful about the threat..."

"Jyushi has always been protective of me," I lowered my eyes to look at my boots, "We've recently had a talk about that side of him, so he knows that he can't just bully his way to my side every time."

"You should have that talk with Kara, too."

Recognizing the snarky tone that Todo's voice suddenly picked up, I glanced up to see him partially glare past my shoulder. Shifting my weight to look behind me, I withheld a gasp as I spotted the pair of bright copper eyes staring past me, the teal-blue form of the intruding naga difficult to find in the darkened foliage.

"Kara?"

"She's fine, brother," Todo's voice rose in volume, the sounds of leaves and dead branches crunching underneath his tail as he moved up to stand next to me, "You didn't need to follow her."

"With the reaction that she had last time you both were alone, I wanted to make sure that there wasn't a repeat incident," Kara pushed his way forward through the foliage, the dampened sunlight falling onto his scales in tiny dots. I wouldn't have realized he was there if Todo hadn't mentioned anything.

"Kara, I'm fine," I tried to sound reassuring, but my confidence faltered as the bright copper eyes of the older brother remained locked on the naga next to me, "We were just talking."

"You had talked of my scent offending you back on that other island, yet you're projecting the same kind of scent," Kara's voice lowered in pitch, his top lip curling back into a snarl, "Care to explain?"

"What is there to explain?" Todo moved forward to meet the older brother's challenge, "We were just having a pleasant conversation, and I

was

about to say some sensitive things to (y/n). However,

you

ruined the moment by ensuring that I sensed you."

"Kara, how long were you watching?" I tried to de-escalate the tension that I sensed growing between the two nagas. I only had enough energy to see one fight today, and didn't want to see what would happen between a venomous and non-venomous naga.

"Long enough," Kara huffed, the breath coming out as a hiss before he finally locked eyes with me, "I thought you knew to not look him directly in the eye."

"That's already been cleared up between us," Todo inched forward, lifting himself up a little to catch Kara's eye.

"This doesn't concern you."

"Obviously, it does! I told her that I had only used my ability with good intentions on my part, and apologized for doing something she misread as harmful."

"Guys, stop!" I yelled out, startling both nagas and looking between them as they focused on me a few feet underneath them. A look of realization flashed over their faces and they lowered themselves to my eye level, clearly not realizing that they were priming for a fight in my presence.

I let a drawn-out sigh pass between my lips, closing my eyes for a moment before locking my gaze with Kara.

"Todo was trying to show me where I could find edible food in his territory, since he had asked about my well-being when my body alerted me that I needed to eat," I watched as his stern gaze softened a little, "After that was made clear, I asked him why he used his ability back at the spring and that's when he apologized. Kara, I can't speak for what he was feeling when he

was talking to me, but I'm not worried about Todo using his ability on me anymore."

Kara's eyes hardened a little, shifting to glance back at Todo before looking back at me with the silent question of 'why'.

"I trust him."

I saw Todo stiffen out of the corner of my eye while Kara took in a sharp breath, holding it for a little while before his form completely relaxed.

"Very well," Kara gave a small smile, "Since you're not in distress, then I worried for nothing. Just please --" He rested a hand against my right upper arm, a pleading look in his eyes, "-- call out if you need help."

"Like she'll need help from you all..." Todo growled harshly as Kara backed up a few feet, sending a glare after the older brother as the viper naga disappeared into the jungle.

An uncomfortable silence settled over the area that seemed to stretch on forever before Todo clenched his hands and twisted towards the deeper parts of his territory.

"Get out of here..."

"Todo...? I thought we were okay--"

"Just get out of my home!" I recoiled as Todo reeled towards me, his pupils wide and locked onto my form, "It's all your fault that they're acting strangely!"

"Hold on, Todo!" I took a few steps back, trying to not project my sudden fear to alert Kara, "Who is acting strangely?"

"My brothers, you serf!" He snarled out the title I chose, "

You're

the reason why they're suddenly so jumpy about anything you do or project, yet you do nothing to stop them!"

"I can't detect scents like you all can!" I quickly countered, a little hurt that he was so quick to jump back into the argumentative state that he had just apologized for, "I don't know how to control them like you can, nor can I do anything about it! I don't have the same organs as you all."

Todo's face screwed up as an array of emotions crossed his features, his mouth forming words that never made a sound. A few moments of silence let him physically relax, his copper eyes downcast and focusing on the underbrush nearby.

He really was similar to an older teenager, but I quickly cleared the thought from my head and refocused my attention on him.

"Sorry..." Another apology, "I know you can't control what you project to everyone on the island, and I also know that you can't sense what we say to each other."

His hands covered his face as the youngest naga took a deep breath in, releasing it through his fingers before letting his hands drop to his sides once more.

"We all got along for the most part before Jyushi found you. So much so that we could share each other's problems without worry of major retaliation," Todo raised his copper eyes to mine, "Then you came along and stirred us all up. No one else wants to say it, so I'll just let you know..."

I held my breath as my body stilled, seeing the amber flecks become more reflective in his eyes.

"Your scent is becoming so strong that we're struggling to hold ourselves back. It happened a few times at the zoo, too, but there was a door to separate us from you...Now there's nothing to physically stop us."

"Are you...all coming into heat?" I couldn't help the look of confusion that rested on my face, my mind trying to remember if male snakes had a heat

cycle like females did. Todo let his head hang back, staring at the sky for a few seconds before lowering his gaze back to mine.

"No, (y/n).

You are

."

Chapter 49

"I -- excuse me, what?" I couldn't help but stare at the pattoni naga, his dark copper eyes holding my gaze as I tried to make sense of what he said, "Todo...humans don't go into heat."

"Clearly," His eyes narrowed a little, the neutral look starting to fall into a frustrated frown, "I don't know what it's called for your species, but your scent is...getting really strong."

I lightly pressed my right hand onto my lower abdomen, "Women ovulate...so maybe that's what you're smelling?"

"Ah-view-late?" Todo slowly pronounced the word, obviously foreign on his tongue.

"It's what happens to female humans when their body is getting ready to potentially produce a child," Letting my hand fall to my side, I closed my eyes for a moment, "In really simple terms, it

is

what other species would consider heat, but it doesn't affect humans like it would other animals. We don't have noses that can function like yours can, so we don't really know when that cycle starts unless we plan for it."

Todo didn't say anything, simply listening to my words in silence.

"Todo, I need to know," My mind started to work overtime, trying to figure out if there was a way that I could set up boundaries now before mistakes were made. I had no idea what the nagas were like, and since there weren't any female nagas, there was a chance that they didn't know how they'd react, either, "Do you know if there's anything I can do to dissuade you and your brothers from trying anything?"

"Well, we're not going to turn into mindless creatures that only want to lock with you, if that's what you're worried about," He scoffed, crossing his arms across his chest, "It'll just be...harder to talk to you about anything else."

I took several steps back from him, "Okay, so distance is key, then."

"Distance isn't going to do much when we can all smell you...you know that, right?"

"I didn't realize that I could affect you all like this, okay? It's news to me, so I want to make sure that nothing happens."

"How could we talk to you about this?!" Todo held his hands out to me in exasperation, "'

Oh, hi (y/n). Nice scent you have today. Say, it's so sweet that it's maddening when you leave, so please come closer so I can have it all to myself

'? Yeah, that would've gone well for you."

"At least that would be better than not telling me until I'm on your home turf where I can't do much about it. I don't have many options to keep myself safe here," I turned to pace back and forth a few steps, my hands running through my messy hair, "If I had known that this would have posed a problem, then I would've prepared for it."

"Stop..."

"I don't even know how I can stop my scent from being broadcast to the entire island! I literally can't do anything about it because your scent glands are so different from mine."

"(Y/n)..." Todo's voice was quiet against my own voice bouncing around my head, trying to organize thoughts and ideas of what I could do.

"Maybe I could find a place to bunker down for a few days or so, since that's how long ovulation usually lasts. I'd have to do something for food and water, but--"

"(Y/n), stop!" Todo grabbed my shoulders roughly, pulling me down to the ground and stopping my pacing instantly. I was left stunned as he held himself up over me, his face twisted up with a pained annoyance, "Your panic isn't doing me any fucking favors, okay?!"

I blinked a few times, catching my breath as I watched the naga above me slowly lift himself off of me, sliding his hands down my arms before completely letting go. Todo looked away from me as he recoiled from where I lay, his eyes downcast and focused on the ground.

"Consider my chores cancelled for now...Just go to your den, (y/n)."

"Todo?"

"Get out of here before I do something I

really

regret."

"You said that you

wouldn't

become mindless creatures," I scrambled to my feet, suddenly uncertain about the look in Todo's eyes. The dark copper was brightly flecked with amber, but his eyes were locked onto something on the ground, "Todo, if no one tells me anything, I won't know how to react for problems that could arise."

"We won't -- I won't force myself on you," The naga's hands started to shake, "But my instincts are telling me to do otherwise. They have been for the past few days...but since there's no other humans to interfere, everything in me is telling me that I

need

to lock with you."

"Is there anything that can calm that down? Something that can distract your mind from what your instincts are telling you to do to me?" I kept my distance, noticing that his ability was now active on some small pitiful creature in front of him, "I want to help you, Todo...just tell me what to do that can ease the struggle that you're going through."

"Run."

"What...?"

"Run back to your den in Jyushi's territory," Todo caught himself before he could look directly at me, the amber flecks catching more sunlight as he stared at a tree a few feet to my left, "Knowing him, he's probably waiting for you to come back...Jyushi will keep you safe from the others, but I don't know how well he can keep you safe from himself."

"But what about--"

"When I have a moment to clear my head, I'll try to help you come up with a solution and share it with the others," Todo bit out each word, his teeth showing with each syllable, "For now...run."

Taking in a deep breath, I took off in the direction that Todo had escorted me from, dodging around trees and fallen debris. Catching myself a few times from falling, I sucked in a sharp breath between my teeth as I felt a familiar pain wrap around my ankle while I ran. Hoping that the old injury wouldn't act up, I slowed down a little before bursting through the jungle line, catching my footing before I could fall into the river that cut near the northern border of Todo's territory.

I wasn't anywhere near Jyushi's territory.

In fact,

I had gone the wrong way

.

Looking just beyond the opposing river bank, I saw the change in undergrowth as the grass was choked out by the hard rock underneath breaking through the surface and growing in size as the craggy area spread out towards the coast of the island. This was near where Ichi and I hid from the hunters, and I wasn't sure if I wanted to be around Ichi if my scent was enough to cause the nagas discomfort...but I knew that I wasn't going back through Todo's territory. Not with the glare he was giving the ground and tree in order to not look at me.

Finding a safe place to cross the river, I jumped in and my feet hit the bottom of the shallow river, the water flowing up to my knees. Stifling a shudder from the cold water, I forged my way through the river, keeping my ears strained to any suspicious noise that could warn me of any nagas nearby.

If the scent of my body ovulating was causing the nagas to be extra cautious around me and making them tense around their brothers, then it would line up with Jyushi's sudden closeness since we had landed. It would also explain Kara's possessiveness when I was with Todo, and Todo's own reaction in defense. Ichi never showed signs of interest when we were hiding in the cave together, but that may have only been because of the survival situation.

I took a step up on the opposite bank, pulling myself out of the river and continuing towards the rocky flatlands that stretched out to the ocean.

Todo had said that all of the brothers knew about what was happening to my body, stating that it's been a total of three days since his instincts started bothering him about me. That was just halfway into the helicopter trip, and with how clingy they were of me while they slept, it partially made sense now.

The sounds of rocks shifting before hitting the ground caught my attention, pulling me from my inner musings and focusing on the small clearing I had wandered into. The makeshift path that I had been following continued further into the rocky area, but I could feel eyes looking at me.

"Hello?" I cautiously called out, unsure if this was considered Ichi's territory or not. I had guessed that it could've been earlier, since he had intimate knowledge of the area and found a spot to hide me in, but I never asked him outright.

There wasn't an answer to my question, silence filling the area before I took a few more steps towards the other side of the clearing. Moving as quietly as I could, I pressed through the area and headed towards the mountain range to the west.

If I could make it to the overlook, then I could regain my bearings and find my way back to where I had started making a home...or head to the lab and barricade myself in. I wasn't sure which route would be easier to do, or which option would be safer.

I trusted the nagas probably as much as they trusted me, but if I was the source of something that was driving their instincts up the wall...then maybe it would be better for me to completely remove my scent from the air.

The lab still looked like it could function as a shelter, with the door flaps still working...but I still didn't want to live there. Not when Calmine could send people out whenever he wanted.

I paused, my mind snapping to the hunters that had come to the island. I couldn't recall if I heard their helicopter leave, inwardly groaning as the uncomfortable thought of having to remove the helicopter from the island myself. I wasn't trained to fly any kind of craft, and there were so many knobs, switches, and dials on any flight control panel that I always worried that the pilots would hit some kind of self-destruct switch and destroy the craft. There probably wasn't anything like that on board, but the thought refused to go away.

Taking in the deep breath while closing my eyes, I slowly opened them and continued on my way, pushing forward through the larger rocks and boulders that had fallen down the mountain range over the years.

"Ichi...?" I climbed on top of a large boulder with a flat-enough top that I could stand on, looking up to the mountain range and seeing the overlook almost halfway up the closest mountain slope. It looked like it was still a solid two or three hour walk, and my feet started to ache at the thought. Turning away from the mountain range, I swept my gaze over the rocky area, unsure if the lavender corn naga was within hearing distance of me, "Ichi, I'm just passing through in order to go to the overlook. I want to head back to my home here, so I'll do my best to stay out of your way, all right?"

"...fine."

The response was much closer than I anticipated, sounding right behind me and forcing me to swallow a scream of surprise as I whipped around to face Ichi. He had somehow perched on the boulder right behind me, his form completely relaxed like he had been there the whole time despite me not seeing him just a few moments ago when I was facing that way.

"Ichi--" I paused, noticing that his lavender scales were much more faded than yesterday, "Are...you shedding?"

"Getting ready to," Ichi pressed his lower face into his crossed arms, lounging on his coils while letting his back soak in the early evening sun, "You're worried about something, and I'm guessing that it's because of whatever happened in Todo's territory."

"You...you can't smell it?" Keeping my distance, I edged towards the furthest point of the boulder before kneeling down, lowering myself to his eye level.

"Of course I can, (y/n)...I just can't be bothered about it," His dark eyes shifted away from me, "Shedding is uncomfortable enough as it is."

I sat in silence for a long moment before speaking again, "Shedding...stops you from pursuing me?"

"The uncomfortableness does," He met my curious gaze, "Would you be focused on something if you were wearing clothes that were a little too tight on you?"

"No, probably not. I'd be more irritated about the clothing, unable to focus on whatever task I was doing until I changed clothes," The lightbulb went off in my head, "I know that this is probably crazy of me to ask, but do your brothers visit you often?"

"Not unless they had a reason to," Ichi's eyes hardened quickly, "If you're trying to stay here, don't. I can tolerate the scent for a little while, but the shed won't stop my instincts."

"That's what I had kinda figured..." I gave a long sigh, closing my eyes for a moment before looking back at Ichi, "It'll only last for another day or so, but I'll do my best to stay out of your way. Is there an easy path up to the overlook? I'm trying to get back to Jyushi's territory and my home."

"You know that you're going to have to go through either Oso's or Choro's territory to get home, right?" Ichi yawned and sat up on his coils, "I'd honestly avoid both of them if you're able, but since you can't smell things like we can, you have no way to dodge them..."

"If I follow the southern edge of the range, then I think I can make it to Jyushi's territory fine," I pointed up towards where the mountain range curled away from Ichi's and Todo's claims, "It'll be a jaunt, but doable."

"Yeah, and risk drawing all three of their attention," Ichi shook his head, "I'll escort you through Todo's and Oso's territory, following the southern edge of the range instead. My scent may not completely smother yours, but it should be enough of a deterrent for my brothers to leave you be."

He looked pensive for a moment longer before speaking again.

"I'm not a fighter, so if they do press an offensive front, I won't be able to keep you away from them."

"I understand," I nodded before standing up, "We'll move at your pace, since you're the one shedding."

The pace that Ichi picked was still fast for me, trailing behind him a few feet as he navigated the easier path for me to walk before coming to the

river that I had crossed almost an hour ago. Ichi took a short moment to smell out where I had crossed earlier, motioning for me to follow while he slid into the cool water. I noticed that Ichi slowly came closer as we walked through the western edge of Todo's area, not pointing it out to him as I noticed he seemed to grow more on edge.

The marshlands thinned out as the slope of the mountain range took over the terrain, lifting up the land and allowing some of the neighboring grassland to spread out. Ichi had shifted from leading me to walking on my left, keeping me moving as a focused look settled on his face.

"Ichi?"

"Don't stop," His dark eyes glanced down at my colored hues, "Don't ask questions."

I merely nodded as I kept following his lead, an oppressive feeling I didn't realize I had suddenly lifting from my shoulders as I saw the grassland extend past the marshland and roll into the gentle hills and plains from before.

The small scattering of trees throughout the plains offered little cover, and the waist-high grass was swaying with the evening breeze as the sun started to dip low towards the horizon.

"We should make it to your den just as the sun goes underneath that line," Ichi nodded towards the horizon, "It'll be close, but with any luck, Jyushi will be asleep."

"You're

that

worried about crossing into his territory?" I whispered, following Ichi as he swerved through the plains.

"It's not a worry," His voice was just as quiet, "I'd rather not fight my brothers."

My mind went to Todo and what had happened earlier that day, the physical fight between him and Jyushi, and the posturing between him and Kara.

"I'm sorry..."

"Nothing to be sorry about. This is new for all of us, and I know that something will be figured out when we're in the right state of mind again."

I felt Ichi's hand lightly brush against mine before he yanked his arm away, as if touching me had burned him. A look of turmoil crossed his face before something grabbed his attention, turning to look at his left.

"I told you what I was doing," Ichi spoke slowly, his voice taking on a darker tone as his body shifted into a defensive posture, "I have no intentions on doing anything other than that, and I'll leave immediately after completing it."

I held my breath as I took a step out from Ichi's shadow, seeing a naga facing us from a few meters away.

The red hair was hard to miss in the sunset, the natural reddish light accentuating the hair color even more as the sun started to lower behind the naga. His eyes were staring right at Ichi, the red-and-black hues lit up in the evening colors as he stood still in the windblown grass.

Ichi grabbed my left wrist and pulled back, forcing me back behind him as I heard a low hiss whisper on the wind, "Big brother, I'm only taking her home. I have no feud with you."

Oso didn't offer a response as the wind gently caressed the long grass, catching me by surprise when I heard Ichi respond to something with his own hiss, tightening his coils up like a wall in front of me.

"Oso--"

"I'll take her the rest of the way," Ichi was cut off by the familiar voice of Oso, somehow closer than where I saw him last, "You're injured and need to rest."

"You're more hurt than I am. I offered her an escort through your claim, and she'd make her own way home through Jyushi's territory," There was a faint shake to Ichi's voice, "Just let us pass through...and no one else will find out about it."

"Are you threatening me, little Ichi?"

"Not a threat, a promise--" Ichi was cut off mid-sentence as I saw fingers curl around his neck.

"I'll commend you on putting up a brave front, but we had an agreement," Oso came into view as he quickly forced Ichi down to the ground, the only contact between the two nagas being Oso's hand around Ichi's throat, "Don't think that (y/n)'s presence here would dissuade me from enforcing it."

Chapter 50

"Oso, stop!" I cried out as I wrapped my hands around the red-headed naga's outstretched arm, trying to force him to release the younger naga pinned to the ground, "I don't know what agreement you had with each other, but I was the one who asked him to bring me through here!"

"(Y/n)," The red-and-black hues softened as Oso looked towards me, "I'm sorry this is happening in front of you, but please...step

back

."

"No, I won't," I glared back at him, tugging on his arm for emphasis, "Ichi had already told me that he doesn't want to fight, so leave him be."

Oso relaxed his hand, letting Ichi crawl away from him a few feet while coughing to recover his breath. I stood between the two nagas, wanting to act as a physical barrier for Ichi despite knowing that it really didn't matter since I was significantly weaker than either of them. The oldest naga closed his eyes for a moment, turning his head to the side before opening his dual-colored orbs and looking back at me.

"(Y/n), Ichi and I had an agreement that we wouldn't trespass on each other's territory. It doesn't matter if we're with you or not," Oso's eyes hardened as he shifted his focus behind me, glaring at the lavender corn naga, "And it

shouldn't

matter if you're in heat or not."

"I don't have that kind of intention, Oso," Ichi quickly responded, his voice sounding rough, "You're the one making his intentions clear enough to those who can sense it."

"Look, I didn't know that you both had an agreement," I cut in, still maintaining my focus on Oso, "Ichi never mentioned it to me, so I had thought that you all could pass through the other territories freely. Since he's in shed, I didn't think that he had the drive like the rest of you do. I just want to get back home and bunker down until this 'heat' passes. That's all I want."

"If you simply want to get to your den, then I can escort you to wherever you set up. I will

not

allow Ichi to pass, though," Oso's hues hardened once more at the mention of the younger naga.

"What the hell happened where you needed an agreement to stay out of each other's territories?" I released his arm with partial disgust, "I had thought that you were all getting along fine before humans came."

"Do humans with siblings have constant harmony in their relationships with their kin?" Oso shook his arm out as his brow furrowed, "You must have been the only offspring in your family if that's what you think."

"That's none of your business," I took a step towards the red-haired naga, catching him off-guard as he backed away quickly, "I left everything and everyone behind to be here with you all, so I think that the least you could do was tell me what's going on so I don't set off some kind of sibling war!"

There was a heavy silence that covered the field as the wind gently brushed through the long grass, the sun starting to dip beneath the horizon. I took in a slow breath, thinking that I had definitely crossed a line that wasn't ready to be talked about before I heard Ichi speak up behind me.

"We...don't all get along, (y/n). It may have seemed that we did in your country because we were alone there -- trapped and held against our will by humans that wanted to use us for their own gain," The lavender corn sounded like he had recovered from being choked out, able to take in a breath without coughing, "You...(Y/n), you were our only lifeline and

passage out, so we put aside our own differences in order to get home. Now that we're back..."

"...what we had cast aside for our safety is now the focus again," Oso finished, "Years ago, I had caught Ichi hunting in my territory, despite him having plenty of quarry in his own claim."

"You all

forced

me to take that barren land as my own!" Ichi hissed, drawing my attention back towards him as he settled into an aggressive stance, "That was supposed to be

Todo's

!"

"You were there at the meeting, Ichi," Oso instantly responded with hostility, curling up into a striking position and baring his teeth, "We gave you plenty of chances to object--"

"No, you didn't! You and Kara only asked if that place was suitable for me to hunt, and when I gave my honest answer, everyone seemed settled that it would belong to me!"

"Stop!" I slapped both of my hands together, the clapping sound cracking through the tense air and causing both nagas to flinch at the loud sound. I pressed both palms against my hips, stifling the painful sting while taking a dominating stance, "How it happened is in the past. Is there any way to just let Ichi hunt here when he's unable to find food in his own territory?"

I looked towards the mountain range just to the north of us, looking at the eastmost peaks before it turned north.

"This is the furthest area of your territory, and the northeastern most part that's closest to Ichi."

"It's still my claim," Oso gave a disapproving growl.

"Yet it still has more food in the drier moons," Ichi hissed lightly in response. The oldest naga switched his gaze towards the younger, the growl growing into a hiss as the lavender corn reacted with his own growing louder.

I rubbed my forehead with my right hand, becoming frustrated with the circle of logic that was starting to happen, and there was still a chance that the scent of my ovulation was causing Oso and Ichi to react more violently than normal.

Without saying another word, I looked towards the horizon to see the sun dip further beyond the horizon, matching it with my inner compass and walking towards the sunset. Angling my path just to the right of the sun, I heard the noises die down behind me, partially wondering what the nagas were doing before the rustling of the long grass indicated that someone was trailing me. Clenching my fists, I turned to see Oso several feet behind me, worry and concern on his face while Ichi remained even further behind the oldest.

"(Y/n)...?"

"I'm going home," I stated clearly, "I'm tired, frustrated, and just want to talk to you all normally, without worry of my scent driving you mad just by being around me. I've seen Jyushi and Todo get into a physical fight, Todo and Kara almost start a fight...and now you're doing the same with Ichi. I don't want to see it anymore."

"(Y/n), I'm sorry," Oso had opened his mouth, but the voice was Ichi's. We both looked towards him, the lavender corn naga slowly coming closer before stopping well out of Oso's strike range, "I should've told you, but I wanted to help you out. This was my fault, despite me trying to avoid it."

"Ichi," My gaze softened as I took a few steps forward, "I never intended to make you get into trouble. Go back home and rest up. I'll be back to visit you in a few days, okay?"

Ichi didn't show any outward acknowledgement before his dark eyes met mine, turning away and quickly heading back to his own territory. I watched him until I couldn't see him anymore, continuing on my way without acknowledging that Oso was following me again.

"(Y/n)?"

"What," I could hear my irritation in my voice.

"Are you sure you didn't want to hide in my den?" He glided up next to me, motioning towards an area to the south of us, "It's probably not your first choice, but--"

"No," I stopped walking and faced him fully, "Oso, this is the second hurdle that I have on the island, and I feel like I'm going to make it worse if I run to one of you for help. Getting close to any of you right now is probably not for the best, for either of us."

"What do you mean?"

"What do you

think

it means, Oso?" The break in my voice was hard to listen to, my frustration finally coming out in full force, "I know that I'm currently the source of a lot of contention with you and your brothers, considering I'm going through a short 'heat' period, and I know how snakes react to that in the wild. I don't want that happening to you guys, so I'm just going to remove myself completely from situations that would cause problems. As much as I really want to stay in one of your guys' dens on the island, I simply can't because I think that would create a bigger rift."

The red-headed naga simply stood there and listened to me, his face never betraying any reaction to what I was saying. I pressed the heels of my hands over my eyes, trying to stifle the sudden urge to cry as my knee buckled and I knelt heavily on the ground. Despite my emotions running wild with every small inclination, I could still think clearly and knew that

that time

was definitely closer than I realized. Just another day or two of keeping away from the nagas, for both their sakes and my own, and then I'd be okay to be around them again.

I felt two hands gently lay on my shoulders before they travelled across my collarbones to embrace me in a hug, feeling something press against my back as another thing rubbed against my left cheek.

"Everything is going to be okay, (y/n)," Oso's voice was gentle, nearly whispering in the silence between my sobs, "We're going to figure this out, find a good way to live with what you're going through. We can adapt, so please don't be sad about this small hiccup."

I shifted my hands to cling to his forearms, feeling some of his scales with my thumbs as I let the tears flow freely down my cheeks.

We stayed in the position until the sun completely disappeared beneath the horizon, shining some of its last rays onto the sparse clouds before the night completely engulfed the sky.

"Is there...anything that I can do to help you?" Oso gently spoke near my ear.

"I'm not sure," I responded softly, seeing the stars light up the night, "I just...want to be around someone right now."

"Well, I don't need to go anywhere for a while."

"I shouldn't be near you."

"Because of your scent? I'm not going to turn into some desperate thing," He laughed a little, pulling away from me and releasing my shoulders. Settling in front of me, Oso reached out and brushed a few strands of hair out of my face, the starlight providing just enough glow to let me see him offer a small smile, "I won't deny that it's strong, but I've got enough control where I won't be driven to the point of forcing you down."

"Then, I should leave. I don't want you to lose that control."

"If you're absolutely sure," He let a sigh escape his lips, "I won't keep you here."

I stood up from where I fell, feeling his hand leave my face as I stretched.

"(Y/n)..." Oso moved with me, standing to my eye level, "Just remember that you're able to call on us for help, okay?"

"I know, and I'll keep that in mind," Giving him a genuine smile with a farewell wave, I turned back towards my destination and pressed on.

Chapter 51

To say that the next two days were boring would be a

large

understandment.

While I had deterred Jyushi from coming close to my home, it didn't stop him from trying to help me with reinforcing it with flexible branches or gathering large leaves to use as a kind of wall. Focusing my efforts on building out my little home on the naga island, I had hoped to make the time fly faster by diverting my attention to build, but instead kept finding myself thinking about how I could make my predicament more tolerable. I didn't want to hide away from the nagas and I knew that they wouldn't turn into uncontrollable monsters that only had an urge to force themselves on me, but I knew that we'd be able to talk about a solution to this problem that we had.

I woke before the sun rose on the second day, folding up the cobbled-together blanket that I had made from the torn shirts that I had used to hold the knives through the trip back to the island. More than half of the walls were constructed around the small enclosure, the exposed part facing the western horizon and the wetlands that faded into a beachhead before diving underneath the ocean.

Stretching out my body, I grabbed a loose-fitting tee shirt and jeans -- along with a change of undergarments -- before making my way towards the nearby spring with the selected toiletries. During the last few days, I had started to learn the signs of when Jyushi was in the area (or at least when he wanted me to know that he was around) and took in a relaxed breath when I didn't see or hear any clues of his presence near the spring. I still gave a

visual sweep of the area to make sure that the other nagas weren't trying to spy on me, the incident with Todo still fresh in my mind.

Satisfied with the emptiness of the immediate area around the spring, I undressed and dove into the cold water, letting my aching muscles stretch as I slowly swam around the spring. Taking a deep breath when I surfaced, I went through my new bathing regiment, starting with my hair and face before moving down to my chest and arms, finishing off with my legs and feet. After roughly rubbing off the soap and shampoo in the clear spring waters, I climbed up to the shore and grabbed the towel sitting on a nearby rock, quickly drying off and slipping into the clean clothes I had chosen.

"Are you finished?"

I stifled a scream into the towel as I heard a voice suddenly call out from the furthest brush, taking a few steps away and pulling the towel away from my face, glaring angrily at whoever it was that spoke.

The pink dots were hard to miss as the youngest naga pushed forward through the foliage, his eyes closed within the black and yellow scales that created a mask over the top half of his face. Todo kept moving until he was a few feet from the edge of the spring, his eyes still closed.

"Todo..." I slung the towel over my shoulder, crossing my arms comfortably over my chest as I spoke, "What are you doing here?"

"I was tasked with telling you that we can't figure out how to move that flying thing from the island," His face shifted a little, "May I open my eyes?"

"You can," Keeping my gaze away from his own, I watched from my peripheral as Todo opened his eyes, glancing around the area before looking back towards me, "Is that what you all were doing while I was...preoccupied?"

"For the most part, since we didn't want to really be near you," He scoffed, "Jyushi was the only one that didn't really offer his help, so we had guessed

that he was doing something with you. From your scent, it wasn't our first thought."

"You thought he was mating with me," I simply raised an eyebrow, tackling the subject head on.

"Most of us did, considering you chose a den in his territory."

"Well, just because I chose to live in his territory doesn't mean that I've made myself exclusive to him," I leaned down to gather my dirty clothes and toiletries, wrapping them up in the towel before hooking my arms around the rudimentary package, "The helicopter is in Choro's territory, right? By the lab?"

"Yeah," Todo didn't make any moves to come closer to me, but a slightly worried look crossed his face and caught my attention.

"What is it?" I stopped from walking towards my incomplete house, looking over my shoulder back at the youngest naga.

"Are we...are you and I all right after a few days ago?"

"As far as I know, yes. Is my scent still overpowering?"

"No, not at all," Todo shook his head, looking down at the spring, "I can escort you to the helicopter if you'd like."

I let out a soft sigh, a small smile resting on my lips.

"I'd like that. Just let me put this away and I'll be back."

I was panting by the time I returned to the spring, hearing hisses and growls as I came closer and urging my feet to run over the rough terrain.

Breaking through the dense leaf cover, I barely caught my breath before I felt something hard slam into me, knocking the remaining breath out of my lungs and causing me to stagger to the ground. The thing that had hit me fell

down on top of me, quickly rolling off and gathering me in its arms. I blinked to see a worried Todo looking down at me with shock prevalent on his face, another blink showing his lips pulling back into a snarl as he looked at something in front of us.

"No wonder Oso said to be wary of you," Todo's voice lowered into a growl, quickly regaining his posture and holding me against his chest as I finally caught my breath, "You're way too possessive of (y/n), even outside of her heat."

"(Y/n)..." A new voice muttered quietly, the tone sad. I looked over to see Jyushi press his hands to his face, "I'm so sorry! I didn't realize that you were coming...!"

"Jyushi, what happened?" I made my intentions clear to Todo and he let go of me, allowing me to stand on my own.

"I thought Todo was here to bother you again, so I told him to leave," The albino reticulated naga bit his bottom lip nervously, "When he said that he was waiting for you here, I told him that I would bring you wherever you needed to go...and we got into a fight."

"Jyushi," My voice was stern, making the naga flinch a little as I took a step closer. I softened my voice, "I think I understand what you were trying to do, but the others need my help with something. I told Todo to wait here while I dropped off my bathing things. Why did you think that he was here to bother me?"

"He did it last time, and you were really upset from it...so I wanted to get rid of the problem before you came to this area," Jyushi looked down at me as I stopped in front of him, lowering himself down and pressing his forehead against mine, "I wanted to keep you safe."

I felt my heart thud heavily as a soft purr began to roll within Jyushi's chest, his actions speaking louder than his words. He had clearly felt like he wasn't keeping me safe enough, and tried to be proactive at the wrong time and against the wrong person. I closed my eyes as a dark thought wormed its way into my head:

I wasn't giving Jyushi enough attention

. The naga that had clearly displayed a fear of being forgotten and the same one that was jealous of the others for the attention they were getting...I wasn't paying enough attention to him, in his mind.

"Jyushi," His voice was quiet on my lips, the purr growing a little louder as I spoke his name, "I know that you want to keep me safe, but I don't want you thinking that you need to act against your brothers. I'm here for them, too, remember? There's just something that I need to do to make sure that people don't come after us in the future."

"Can I...come with?" Jyushi titled his head enough to look into my colored hues with his bright orange eyes. I hesitated for a moment before closing my eyes.

"You can come with, but promise me that you won't cause others trouble," I gave Jyushi a firm look, "I'm not only yours, okay?"

"Okay!" Jyushi pulled away, his usual wide smile on his face as he looked towards a clearish path that led to the lab, "That's the fastest way, so let's get going."

"Lead on," I waved a hand down the path and followed Jyushi's lead, hearing Todo fall in line behind me.

"Are you sure about this?" Todo leaned close to my ear, his lips practically brushing against my earlobe, "The others may not like him being around you right now."

"Because of my past heat?"

"Because Jyushi has been telling us that we're not allowed to get close to you. He's been spreading that scent nonstop since you disappeared two days ago."

"Well, I haven't mated with him," I partially narrowed my eyes at Jyushi's back, thinking that his insecurities may be deeper than he's told me. If I

wanted to be with the others, then I'd have to calm Jyushi down first.

"Obviously," Todo rose to his full height.

The trek to the helicopter landing area took a little longer than I would've like, having to dissolve tense banter between the two youngest nagas every so often. Todo seemed to enjoy pressing topics and subjects that Jyushi had no intention of talking about, some of them revolving around what he would do with me when I visited his territory. Nothing sexual was mentioned, but I could tell that the intentions were there...and Jyushi fell for them every time.

I had to start intervening when Jyushi shot a glare back at his youngest brother, sensing that they were close to a physical fight. I shut them both up with a kiss, giving one to Jyushi first before whirling around and planting one on Todo's lips.

Embarrassment and anger fought for control as I kept walking on, leaving both nagas behind me, still stunned by what I did. Something deep inside me commented about it, warning me that it wasn't going to be easy being with six people at the same time and jealousy would be a huge problem if communication wasn't clear between all of the respective parties. I knew that I would have to have some private time with Jyushi to fully explain how I expected him to act while I was with the others, but that talk would have to wait until a more opportune time.

I pushed past a few branches to see the small helicopter sitting in the middle of the clearing, the rotor blades sagging with gravity as it sat uncleaned from the past few days. Leaves had fallen over it, creating the beginning look of abandonment if not for the two nagas on opposite sides of the machine, each of them trying to find something that interested them about the helicopter.

The black-and-red coloration of the closest one immediately labelled the naga as Oso while the pure green scales of the other marked the territory owner, Choro.

"I'm guessing that getting it moved is out of the question," I called out as I walked into the clearing, both nagas looking over towards me before glancing behind me.

"Where are the other two that were supposedly escorting you?" Choro raised an eyebrow, lightly resting a hand against the helicopter hull.

"They're back there, just a little preoccupied with their thoughts for the moment," I lightly shrugged, walking up to Oso and pulling open the cockpit door, "If lifting this is out of the question, then I'll need to fly it out of here...somehow."

"Do you know how to do that?" Oso held the door open as I climbed inside the cockpit, settling into where I assumed that the pilot would sit. Both seats had a flight stick in front of them, so I could only guess which seat was what.

"Not at all," I looked at the buttons on the control panel in front of me closely, "If I did, then I wouldn't have really needed a team to get you all back here."

"Where are you going to try and land it?" Choro commented through the closed door, cupping his hand against it and leaning in close.

"Well," I nervously laughed, "That's the thing. This needs to go into the ocean."

Both nagas stilled and stared at me like I had lost my mind.

"The reason being is that I don't want any of the overhead satellites mapping this island with an abandoned helicopter on it," I tentatively flipped a few switches before turning them back to their original position when nothing happened, "Humans are curious creatures and we get bored rather easily, driving us to pick up odd hobbies. One such hobby is looking through GPS pictures and maps, finding odd things that stand out. I don't want the island to seem out of the ordinary."

"So, you're going to get rid of it by...flying it into the ocean," Oso confirmed, looking up at the helicopter, "Are you sure that you're not going to get hurt?"

"Well, I'd be dumb if I was to pilot it myself into the ocean," I laughed a little before shaking my head, "No, I was thinking of landing on the cliff in Ichi's territory. We'd push it over the cliff and it would fall into the ocean by itself. No one would be hurt."

Choro was silent for a moment, his tongue slipping past his lips for a few seconds before he spoke.

"Ichi says that there's a clearing near the cliff, and it should be wide enough to support this thing."

"All right, then tell him to stay near that location so I can find it," I found a small laminated sheet tucked away next to the pilot's seat, quickly scanning it over and finding it to be a pre-flight checklist for the helicopter, "I'm gonna need clearance, guys. I don't want you getting hurt by the helicopter or the debris once the rotor starts going."

"Jyushi and Todo are already on their way there, so they'll be able to help push this over the edge," Oso leaned in close, quickly kissing my cheek before pulling away, "Choro and I will stay here to make sure you get this off the ground safely."

"Thanks," I looked over at him, feeling a faint blush rise on my cheeks as he closed the door.

The cockpit was quiet for a moment, allowing me to gather my racing thoughts and doubts. I started following the pre-flight checklist, hearing various clicks throughout the cabin before I saw the rotor above me start to spin up, gathering speed quickly.

Chapter 52

I had somehow maneuvered around the mountain range, borrowing some knowledge of a flight simulator game of how to generally pilot an aircraft, and now I was trying to steady the helicopter enough to land on the chosen rocky area near the cliffs. It was a lot larger than the clearing where I had taken off from, but the wind from the open sea was creating hard-to-manage updrafts that collided with the cliffs.

Whenever there was a break in the wind, I managed to lower the helicopter towards the ground, but the gyroscope never let me drop down very far before the updrafts hit the helicopter once more, lifting the craft back up into the air.

I felt like an albatross trying to land.

The beeping in the cockpit was loud and annoying, just what was needed to grab the pilot's attention. It was excelling at its job, and I had no clue on how to turn it off or even what was setting it off in the first place.

The three nagas near the area just kept watching as I must've looked like a damned idiot in the cockpit, struggling to make the helicopter drop altitude while fighting against the safety measures that kept it from crashing into the ground.

Pressing the flight stick forward towards the ground, I pressed the rightmost foot pedal, feeling the helicopter respond by swinging to the right with its tail as it lowered a little more to the ground.

"Just go down...!" I yelled at the machine through gritted teeth, moving the flight stick further forward until I felt the pit of my stomach fly up to my throat. The helicopter dropped the last several feet onto the ground as the wind died down completely, slamming its belly onto the rocks and sending more alarms blaring in the cockpit. The drop was jarring, and my hands

started to turn everything off on the console before I realized what I was doing.

"(Y/n)!" One of the doors was ripped from its hinge, the reticulated naga leaning in and grabbing me as a worried look settled on his face, "Are you all right? You're not hurt?"

"No," I gently shook my head as the alarms faded into the distance, "A little shaken, but I'm okay."

"Please don't do that again," Jyushi pressed the bridge of his nose against my cheek, lifting me up before I managed to somehow get out of his arms. He didn't appear to be offended as he focused on the helicopter behind us, "We just need to move that over the cliff, right?"

"That's about it," I stretched my back a little, groaning lightly as I focused on the helicopter laying flat on its belly, the skids collapsed under it from the harsh landing. Ichi and Todo had moved closer to it, peering around the far side for something, "I don't know how heavy it is, but the three of you should be able to handle it."

"Jyushi could probably do this by himself..." Todo muttered loud enough for me to hear, glancing at the mentioned naga with a look of disdain.

"I

could

, but Oso said that we needed to work together," Jyushi focused on Todo's form, the youngest brother meeting his gaze and standing to his full height with a frown on his lips, "We don't need to like it."

"No," Ichi cut in before Todo could respond, "We don't. We just need to push the helicopter over the cliff, and then the two of you can get the hell out of my territory."

A tense silence filled the air after, the relationship between the younger three brothers becoming more clear to me as the quiet dragged on. The

familial problems were deep, and I wasn't going to fix them at all when none of those involved really wanted to do anything about what had caused the rift in the first place.

"Please," My voice was quiet, "I'll help push this over."

My words seemed to focus the nagas' attention, the three of them gathering on either side of me as I placed my hands on a passenger door of the helicopter, grunting as I started to push against the metal frame. Within seconds, the hull creaked and groaned as it scraped across the ground before it was pulled by gravity over the lip of the cliff.

The metal husk tumbled down the rocky face, rolling wildly before splashing into the crashing waters below, sinking beneath the waves.

I stared at the ocean churning against the cliff where we had pushed the helicopter over, my mind blank as I numbly watched each swelling wave crash against the harsh rocky crags. I had heard a verbal fight start up between the three younger nagas, but never paid it any mind as I sat near the edge. The noises never escalated to what I had heard during a fight and silence eventually covered the area, my mind losing track of how much time had passed before I felt someone's tail curl against my back.

"Are you all right?" Ichi's voice was quiet in the silence, the waves far below acting like a white noise.

I merely hummed a response, not sure of what to say.

He didn't say anything further and moved closer to sit with me, his tail cradling me like it had in the cave when we hid from the hunters. The wind that I had fought hard against in the helicopter felt gentle against my face and hair, as if nature was apologizing for its actions.

"That was my ticket home," The state of my voice surprised me, sounding rough like I had been crying for hours.

"Were you...wanting to leave?" Ichi sounded like he was right against my right shoulder, but I didn't have the strength to look at him, "Would that

have made you happy?"

"No..." My eyes fell from the swirling water below to the scrape marks underneath my legs, "It would've been nice to have something to go back to civilization and grab whatever I needed to survive out here."

"Are we not doing enough for you?" His tail tensed around my hips and back, taking in a breath to ready himself for my answer.

"You are," I finally mustered the strength to look over at him, meeting his dark gaze with my own colored orbs, "But there are some things that definitely make remote living a lot easier. Especially when I'm not used to it."

A look of understanding settled on Ichi's face, his focus switching towards the water beneath us, "What are some examples?"

"Well, if I had been able to grab some food supplies, that's where I would've started," A small laugh slipped past my lips, "I would get a portable solar panel that would've made the laptop a lot more useful here, too. There's a wealth of knowledge that people share on that video website I was showing you, and I definitely could use their expertise."

"(Y/n), you don't need to do everything on your own here," Ichi lightly pressed his fingers against my jawbone, bringing my focus back to him, "We don't know what humans need to survive, but we're willing to learn and help you."

"I know you are...but I don't know what I need. I mean, this was supposed to be my first expedition right after graduating university, so everything was already prepared for me by the company," I let my eyelids lower a little before fully closing them, bringing my head out of his hand before opening them again, "I'm a pretty pathetic excuse for a biologist..."

"The (y/n) I love is creative, persistent, and has the drive to achieve the impossible," Ichi grabbed my chin roughly, forcing me to look at him, "She had the curiosity to get to know my brothers and myself, even under the worst circumstances. She was put into tough situations and used both her

wits and knowledge to both keep us calm while waiting, and figure out a plan to enable us to escape. (Y/n) is someone who can think of how to survive."

I was left stunned as he spoke, not expecting the fierceness in Ichi's eyes.

"Yeah, life had put her high on a pedestal to be used by someone with evil intentions, but she took that position and twisted it to her advantage.

That's

the (y/n) I love."

His lips pressed against my own with just as much ferocity that his gaze held, roughly kissing me while shifting his other hand to support my head. I kissed him back in surprise before Ichi took complete control of the kiss, his tail pressing against my back and pushing me into his chest as his hands held my head in place.

I didn't resist him at all, letting his tail press me against him as I closed my eyes and completely sank into the kiss.

There wasn't a need behind it that I could find. Despite the roughness, it was entirely comforting and possibly the only way that Ichi could tell me how he really felt without using words.

My chest spasmed as I took in a shuddering breath, tears falling from my closed eyes as I just fell back into the kiss. I started crying out loud, pressing my head into Ichi's shoulder as his hands shifted to bring me close into a hug, feeling his tail shift to support me against him.

"Don't say that you're pathetic ever again, (y/n)," Ichi whispered before lightly pressing his lips against my neck, right underneath my ear, "It hurts so much to hear you say that about yourself..."

I tightened my arms around his chest as I gave a nod, not trusting myself to talk. He gave another reassuring kiss on my neck before rubbing my back lightly, sitting with me as I cried out all of my emotions -- all of the hurt,

hate, self-loathing, and sadness that had been building since I set foot on this island again.

"Everything taken care of?" Oso questioned before looking towards me, cutting off my arrival as I forged through the thick underbrush of Choro's territory. I had splashed my face quite a few times in one of the springs in Ichi's territory to get rid of the puffiness in my eyes, as well as the tears and dirt that had collected on my face.

"Yeah," I stated firmly, "The helicopter's gone."

"Good," The red-headed naga looked towards Choro, both of them seemingly talking to each other before the oldest gave a heavy sigh, "While you were gone, we decided to help you live a bit more comfortably here. Since your main den is in Jyushi's territory, we knew that we shouldn't just uproot you and force you to live somewhere else...so we created somewhere that we knew you'd be safe."

Oso glanced over at Choro before coming closer, grabbing my hand and forcing me to follow his lead.

"Oso, I can follow you on my own," I pulled my hand out of his surprisingly soft grip, looking back to see Choro give an exasperated sigh before trailing after us. He caught up with me quickly, simply offering a pointed smile as he gently took my hand.

"Oso's not that great at asking you to do things," Choro whispered, leaning down close to me, "He's trying something new."

"Aren't we all?" A small smile rested on my lips as I caught up with Oso's and Choro's pace, following the two nagas down a semi-familiar path as the thick jungle gave way to the mountain range. Both nagas helped me ascend the trail at various points before we stopped on the overlook.

"I don't think I'll ever get tired of this view," I gave a wide smile as I caught my breath, taking in the sight of the surrounding island before focusing on

an overcropping of rock that hadn't been there last time, "What's this...?"

Oso followed me as I made my way closer to the rocks, discovering that the rocks had hidden an entrance to some kind of cave that drilled into the side of the mountain that the overlook was on.

"Kara had suggested that you have somewhere to go when you're...in heat," Oso sounded uncomfortable talking about the subject, "So we scoured the island while you were sequestered away in Jyushi's territory, and realized that the overlook provided enough shelter to stay here for the few days that your heat lasts. It took us a while to get it ready for you, but it was a more pressing matter than the helicopter."

"You guys did this?" I looked over my shoulder, glancing back at Oso and Choro as I leaned into the entrance of the cave, "Mind if I take a look?"

"Go ahead," Choro waved towards the entrance, the pointed smile on his lips, "We're not going anywhere."

I gave a nod, ducking into the cave to see that it was lit up by the sun, a small hole carved out in the 'roof' that let light to flow in. Along the wall with the entrance rested a bed made of loose leaves and grass, the same kind of grass that covered Oso's territory, and a small chair-looking rock had been placed in the corner near the bed. The chair was padded with the same leaves and grass, acting like a cushion against the firm surface.

As I turned around, I spotted a lean rock leaning against a wall next to the entrance. On closer inspection, the rock was resting on several round stones within a deep groove. Narrowing my eyes in doubt, I pulled the rock towards the entrance, scoffing out loud in surprise when the lean rock slid over the stones and completely closed over the entrance, forming a door against the outside elements or unwanted visitors.

It took some effort to open the 'door' again, but this definitely felt more secure than the home I had.

"Guys, I--" I fumbled for words as I walked back out, seeing the oldest naga with a proud smirk on his lips while the third-oldest still held the pointed

smile, "What do I even say? This is great! It should work perfectly when that time comes again."

"You'll have to thank Kara for the idea, as this was most of his doing. We just helped gather things that we thought would make you comfortable."

"My scent won't be a problem from here, will it?" I pressed a few fingers against my lips, my brow furrowing in thought as I imagined staying cooped up inside the cave for the days that my ovulation lasted.

"It's high enough where we're not going to be as affected like we would be if you were on the flatlands," Oso shook his head, "The wind gets pretty strong up here, so your scent will be faint at worst."

"Then I'll definitely use it," I nodded to myself, thinking of packing a small 'getaway' bag for whenever I needed to come here, "Since I can't tell when it starts, would it be all right if I ask you guys to alert me when it starts up?"

Choro glanced at Oso before looking at me again, "That shouldn't be a problem, but that's more of a question for Jyushi, isn't it?"

"Why?" I raised an eyebrow.

"Well," The smirk fell from Oso's lips as he raised a hand to scratch at the back of his head, "He's got this idea in his head that you're only his. We've tried to approach you about this place, but Jyushi acted as your personal guard and caught us whenever we tried to cross into his territory. Kara was so excited to tell you about it, and...well..."

I caught the look exchanged between the brothers.

"What happened," I didn't give them a chance to back out, my eyes hardening in expectation.

"Jyushi injured him pretty badly when he found Kara within feet of your den," Choro took over as Oso's eyes focused into a glare, staring at the ground, "Kara had wanted to surprise you with this in the early morning about two days ago, but Jyushi caught him."

"Kara's hurt...?" My eyes widened in shock, the imagery of the fight between Jyushi and Todo flashing in my mind. Jyushi's jealousy was more of a problem than I realized, but I was more worried about Kara at the moment, "Is that why I haven't seen him in days?"

"He's been staying in his territory, so he won't come across you accidentally," Oso growled in frustration, "With the strong scent that Jyushi was sending, we didn't know what had happened to you until Choro and I saw you at the helicopter earlier...We thought that he-"

"Jyushi and I aren't mated," I cut in, silencing Oso for the moment, "Todo had told me what you had thought happened, but I'll say with certainty that

nothing

happened between Jyushi and myself. I've already told him that I'm not exclusively his, but...I'll have to have a more serious discussion with Jyushi if he's injuring his brothers because of an idea he has in his head."

Silence grew on the overlook as I looked towards the sun settling near its highest point in the sky.

"I want to see Kara," My colored hues focused on Choro and Oso, watching as Choro moved forward a little.

"I'll take you."

Chapter 53

"You said that Jyushi hurt Kara pretty bad..." I ducked under a branch as I followed Choro through the southernmost part of his territory, watching the mountain range close in around us as the earth rose up in random places, "Tell me how bad his injuries were so I'm prepared for it."

Choro glanced down at me from the low branches, meeting my inquiring gaze before focusing on the trees ahead of him as he continued to lead the way, "We don't know how badly he was injured. All we felt was him crying out in pain before he let us know that he wasn't leaving his territory for a while."

"Then," I took longer strides to catch up to the naga effortlessly gliding from branch to branch above me, "There's a chance that he could be disfigured?"

"I don't think Jyushi would do that to one of us," The green mamba naga sounded doubtful for a moment, "But then again, we didn't think that he'd get

this

possessive of you."

"I don't think that anyone could have predicted that..."

The mountain slopes took over the terrain, forcing the jungle to fall back as Choro came to ground and held out his hand for me to take. I took up his offer and climbed up the mountain slopes alongside him, sliding a few times before Choro's hand prevented me from falling all the way to the ground.

The sun was starting to fall in the sky towards the horizon as Choro and I crested the smaller mountain peaks, indicating that evening was quite a few hours away and would most likely fall when we were in Kara's territory.

I could see the line where the marshlands of Todo's territory rubbed up against the flatlands of Oso's territory, both biomes giving way to a large patch of thick jungle towards the coast of the island.

"We'll pass through Oso's land, since the crossing will be easier on your feet," Choro pointed out the path that he intended to take with me, "Kara's den is right in the middle of his territory, so it'll be a little while longer before we reach him."

"That's fine," I caught my breath before making my way down the rolling slope of the mountainside, "I just want to make sure that he's okay, and talk to him about what happened."

I didn't wait for Choro to catch up, using gravity to my advantage and sliding down the rocky parts, letting my boots act as skates on the rough terrain until I had to walk again. This whole mess was more than my fault, and I needed to be the one that set things straight.

Ensure Kara's safety and health first, then talk to Jyushi.

"Kara?" I called out as I stepped around the thicker trees, hearing Choro shift his weight above me in the higher branches. We had been walking through Kara's territory for what seemed like a solid two hours with no sight of finding the viper naga, "Kara, I'm here with Choro. Where are you?"

"He's not responding to me, either," Choro lowered himself down, cutting off my path as he looked at me upside-down, "I'll carry you to his den, and we can trace his steps from there."

I merely nodded my head before grabbing onto his hands, feeling myself get hoisted into the air. Following his instructions, I clung to his back before he took off, practically flying from branch to branch without fear of falling to the ground.

"Is this why you wanted to escort me? So Oso wouldn't have to climb?" I spoke when I could, keeping my teeth from biting down on my tongue before Choro stopped, his tail quickly wrapping around the branch and tree trunk as his head whipped around to look behind us. I stayed quiet as his tongue flicked in and out from his lips, straining to hear anything that the mamba naga was clearly picking up.

Choro was quiet as he descended from the tree, one of his arms pinning me to his back so I wouldn't fall off. His body grew tense as his tongue ducked back inside his mouth, his focus locked onto something I couldn't see.

"I warned you."

"You did, and you can clearly tell that (y/n) is here without him," Choro responded, "She's been with Oso and myself for a majority of the day."

I covered my mouth with a hand, biting back a cry of shock as I watched Kara emerge from the thick underbrush. To say that he was injured was an understatement.

Kara's face was marred with scars, resembling both tooth and claw marks, with an especially nasty bite dangerously close to his left eye. His neck bore some bruising that looked like a rope had been wrapped around it several times before being dragged across it, mimicking a rope burn without breaking the skin, and his shoulders were heavily plastered with some kind of green mash. The teal-blue scales on his arms were indented, some of the mash slathered on the scales that weren't injured. Kara's chest bore the brunt of most of the injuries that I could see, claw marks running down his front and sides while a nasty bite mark looked to be torn into his right side.

"I told you that I didn't want any visitors," Kara was glaring at Choro, the younger of the two maintaining eye contact while keeping me behind him.

"(Y/n) insisted."

"What happened was my fault, Kara," I spoke up, trying to push aside Choro's arm and stand next to him instead of being forced to hide behind

the green naga, "I didn't do anything about Jyushi even when I knew that he wasn't right in his thinking."

The viper naga's copper eyes locked onto my own hues, the tension slightly leaving his gaze as he continued to look at me, "I didn't want you to come here."

"I did," Choro moved his arm from me, allowing me to stand on my own two feet, "He and Oso told me about your idea, about what you did to help me...and about what happened between you and Jyushi when you tried to surprise me with the news."

The harsh look completely vanished from Kara's eyes.

"My visit here is two-fold. I wanted to thank you for giving me a place to stay when my scent becomes too much for you all to handle, and I wanted to do what I could to make sure that you..." I felt my eyes begin to water, closing them tightly to keep the tears from falling, "When I heard that you were hurt because of my inaction, I wanted to do what I could to help you."

"(Y/n), you don't need to do anything," Kara gave a soft laugh, drawing my attention to him as I opened my eyes again, seeing a gentle smile on his lips that contradicted that scarring, "I got too excited and didn't reel myself in before Jyushi caught me. There was nothing that you could've done to help."

"Then let me start now."

"Most of my wounds are already patched up," He shook his head, the teal-blue locks swaying with the movement, "Just go back to your den before Jyushi starts looking for you."

"He won't be coming near any time soon," Choro commented, "Oso and Todo have their borders on a tight watch currently, so no one's going to pass through without alerting either of them. We've also warned him to stay in his territory until I bring (y/n) back, and I'm not leaving her side until she's ready to go."

"I see..." Kara let a relaxed smile rest on his lips before looking at me again, "Well, here I am, (y/n). What did you want to do?"

"I want to see what Jyushi did to you," I bit my inner bottom lip before continuing, "All of it."

Kara closed his eyes a little before glancing towards Choro, "I'm bringing her to my spring. You're welcome to soak if you need it."

"I'll be in the higher limbs," Choro shook his head, his hands digging into the tree behind him as he started to climb, "I feel safer above than below."

Watching his younger brother climb up to a comfortable height, Kara reached out and offered a hand to me, his copper gaze falling down to my form as I took it. He led me through the underbrush and exposed his back to me, revealing more bite marks and bruising that resembled something constricting around him. I averted my gaze.

The sun was starting to lower on the horizon when we breached the ring of trees surrounding the spring he was talking about, Kara letting go of my hand before motioning towards a large flat boulder that looked out of place in the jungle setting.

"You're welcome to sit there while I wash off."

"I can help," I tried to move towards the spring, but felt myself lifted up onto the boulder by Kara.

"No...some of the wounds are deep and I don't want you to hurt me accidently," He shook his head as I sat down, "I know that you'd feel worse if that happened. Just stay here and I'll be back when everything is...exposed."

I stayed quiet as I heard Choro settle into place above me, watching as Kara slipped into the spring and completely submerged himself. I could only guess that this spring was like the one I used, where it was much deeper than it appeared on the surface level.

"You're scared."

"Of course I am," I closed my eyes with a huff, "I don't want to see what Jyushi did, but I need to. I need to see what my inaction caused when I knew that Jyushi had a problem with his possessiveness, and I didn't do anything about it."

Choro remained quiet for a moment, "What are you going to do when you do see what any of us can do to each other on a good day?"

"I'm going to make sure that it doesn't happen again," I narrowed my eyes as I looked above me, spotting Choro's coils wrapped around a branch with his dark green eyes barely glancing down at me from his position, "I don't want to give any of you a chance to have a bad day."

"And if it happens again?"

"I don't know," I was honest, "I'm not a naga like you guys. I'm just a human that's much weaker than you all physically at the end of the day. I don't have any special abilities that I can use against my enemies, nor do I have the natural ability to hide in the place I live. All I've got is my brain and the hope that I don't need to do this too many times.

"All of you say that I can rely on you guys for help, but when I need help with another brother, I don't know what I can do without starting a war between you all. With half of you being venomous and the other half able to kill me with a flex of their coils, I feel like I have to step on eggshells just to survive another day. I've already said this, but it doesn't make it any less true. I'm terrified...but I still love all of you."

My words didn't stir any response from Choro, prompting me to look back up at him and meet his dark green gaze again. He blinked for a moment before closing his eyes for a long while.

"We're not going to hurt you," Choro's voice was soft, "We may get riled up with each other, but we would never turn our fangs or strength against you. This is all new to us, too, so we're learning different rules with each other and with you."

"There," Kara took in a breath of air as he surfaced from the spring, "I think I got all of the paste off..."

I stilled and braced myself before lowering my gaze to the viper naga, watching him emerge from the spring with his body completely exposed. The wounds that were already visible were completely overshadowed by what the mash had covered up.

Kara's shoulders were chewed off, most of the flesh and scales missing as the muscles were exposed to the evening sunlight, pink and white tissues rolling as he moved his arms around to check the wounds himself. His arms were showing the same damage as his shoulders, the wounds too similar to feeding bites that some pet snakes received from a live feeder. The scales along his arms were ripped from the skin, some still hanging off by bits of flesh that hadn't been completely severed.

I slid off of the boulder, taking slow steps towards the viper naga as my right hand lifted to touch a part of his left arm that wasn't covered in wounds.

It was like Jyushi had tried to

eat

Kara.

"Oh, Kara..." My voice was quiet in the silence, my eyes following the wounds around his chest and back to trial down his waist and tail. The tail only bore some damaged scales near the upper half, but it was relatively untouched compared to the humanoid part of the naga.

"Well, the paste stopped the bleeding, so I'd say that's a step in the right direction," Choro commented, his voice remaining unfazed by what he saw.

"I'm going to need to gather some things from Ichi's territory before I can do anything about the bites," Kara laughed a little, "Do you still have some of the lemon balm that I dug up? I want to see if it'll grow here."

"Yeah, they spread like wildfire in my territory, so you should be fine. I'll grab a bush or two when I come back your way."

"Why are you acting like this isn't a big deal?!" I was shocked at how nonchalant both nagas were acting, staring at the wounds that surely would've killed me. They glanced at me before turning their attention towards each other.

"Because I got off easy," Kara stated, a smile on his face.

"Jyushi was having a good day," Choro commented, "I told you this before."

"

This

is a 'good day'?" I scoffed, circling around Kara to see the wounds on his back more clearly, "Kara, you look like you were almost eaten alive."

"It looked much worse a few days ago, so I'd gladly say that this is an improvement."

"What would've happened if it was a 'bad day'?"

"Well..." Kara's voice trailed off, his copper eyes darting away as he raised a hand to the back of his head.

"We'd be down two brothers," Choro finished for him, the green mamba naga crossing to a closer branch.

I lowered my gaze to my feet, looking at the rugged boots covering them as my mind filled in the blanks. I would've found the two of them tangled up in each other's coils and dead, one from strangulation and the other from venom. Taking in a deep breath, I looked up at Kara once more.

"Let me help you put more of that paste on. I think I know what to talk to Jyushi about now..."

"Of course," Kara offered a wide smile, "We'll gather the herbs needed and I'll teach you how to make it."

"You don't just chew it?" I raised an eyebrow as Kara took my hand, leading me into the jungle of his territory.

"Only in emergencies. It has a lot more potency when it's prepared correctly," He lifted a low-hanging branch so I wouldn't get hit by it, "I'll also show you what other kinds of paste to make for different wounds, considering that you probably don't heal as quickly as us."

"Yeah, that'll be a huge help," I returned the gesture with a smile of my own, letting the topic of talking to Jyushi fall by the wayside for now. With how the day was going, I'd be spending time with Kara and Choro for the night, so I'll use that time to get to know them more.

Jyushi would be dealt with in the morning, Choro by my side.

Chapter 54

"Yeah, mix it just like that," Kara called out as I continued to stir the water over the handmade fire, watching the grooved rock that contained both the heating water and shredded leaves of some kind of herb that Kara had picked. I wasn't sure what I was doing, but Kara gave me plenty of positive feedback and useful corrections whenever I did something incorrectly.

"And this is the same paste that you used?" I barely glanced at him, watching Kara's form disappear into the bushes for a moment before he came back with another handful of leaves that looked different from the ones floating in the water.

"Yep," Kara gave an affirmative nod before laying the leaves next to me, "Just keep stirring until the water is completely gone. After that, we'll take the soaked leaves and mash them up with these."

I watched his movements carefully, his copper eyes catching the light of the fire as he met my gaze. A smile turned up the corners of his lips as he held my focus, "Something I can help you with?"

"Just watching, really," I turned my focus back to the rock, "And wondering where you found this."

"I made it, actually," Kara's voice sounded close, his hand reaching out and gently wrapping around my own as he dictated the speed that the stick needed to be at, "Just kept pounding a harder rock against it until I was satisfied with the depth of the bowl. There, keep going like that."

"We have similar tools," Choro chimed in after he finished his food. He never showed me what it was and I never asked, "Kara frequently visits Ichi's territory for the rocks, though. It's practically the only place that has what falls from the mountains."

The night had settled in the sky and with it came a chill that made me shudder. Kara was the one to suggest making some of the more complicated

pastes, since most of them needed to be heated up and advocating that I was the one to stir. It partially made me wonder if he had noticed that I was cold.

"Do you think it's a good idea to talk to Jyushi first thing in the morning?" I let the question hang in the air before looking at both nagas. Choro had a neutral expression resting on his face, his eyes fixed on the little fire, while Kara's lips were pulled taut into a contemplative look. Focusing back on the thickening leaves, I kept stirring, "The reason I ask is because I feel like he's the one that I'm going to have the most problems with on the island. I think he feels that I belong only to him because he found me first, and I kept going to him when I needed comfort when we were at the zoo. There are a few humans that act like he does, but I'm not sure if it's because of what I did or if Jyushi's always been like this."

"Are you asking for advice on how to approach him?" Choro quietly asked as Kara continued to stare at the bowl.

"I think so."

"Then I'll give you my thoughts on the matter," The green mamba naga settled further onto the low hanging branch across from me, his dark green eyes settling on my own as he rested his head on his arms, "I think it's dangerous for you to live in his territory. Jyushi has always been impulsive about things that he finds, taking care of them for the first few days or weeks before completely dropping interest. However, he's never taken notice of living things.

"The fact that he showed you his territory first and you picked somewhere to live in that area may tell him that you're solely his now. Since your heat hit so suddenly after arrival, it may have driven that thought into a drive to keep you safe

and

away from us, considering we are also interested in you."

I felt my face flush with a mixture of embarrassment and understanding.

"Adding on what Todo did to you may have shoved Jyushi into a corner that he didn't anticipate," Choro continued, "There's a large chance that he doesn't even know that what he's doing is wrong."

"It's possible. I've seen and read about humans that can get to that level of possessiveness," I shook my head, "I don't think Jyushi is doing it without thought, but I still want to make sure that he knows where the line is."

"That's why I'm coming with you tomorrow morning," I flinched when I felt a cold hand brush against my cheek, looking up to see Choro adjusting his position on my left, finding a suitable spot on the ground before curling up close, "As I told Kara, I'm not going to leave your side until you want me gone."

I offered him a gentle smile before leaning over and pressing my cheek against his, letting Choro settle into position as I kept stirring the paste, "Thanks, Choro. I really appreciate it."

"It looks about ready," Kara carefully took the stick from my hand and used it to dig out the paste onto a flat stone that looked heavily stained in the firelight, "I'll take care of the rest."

"Are you sure?" I followed his actions as he crumpled up a few of the laid out leaves into the paste, working them in with the stick before adding a few more, "I can still help."

"You've already learned quite a few recipes already," He looked over towards me, meeting my eyes with the fire reflecting in his copper hues, "You're a fast learner, and I don't want you overburdening yourself."

"Oh, please," I scoffed lightly, adjusting my sitting position to watch him work, "I love to learn new things, especially when they can really help me in a pinch."

Kara's lips stretched into a larger smile, his focus shifting back to what he was doing as he started to talk about what steps he was taking to create a more solid paste.

A loud hiss startled me out of my sleep, feeling the ground underneath me shift a little before I sat up. Another hiss sounded behind me, drawing my attention as I blinked sleepily.

Kara was reared up, his lips curled into a snarl as some of his teeth clenched, his full attention fixated on something in front of him and behind me.

I quickly turned around to see Jyushi leering down at me from a tree, his strong coils wrapped around several branches as his hand propped up his humanoid half on the trunk. The vibrant orange hue grabbed my attention first before Jyushi blinked, his focus shifting to my right.

Waking up in an instant, I jumped to my feet as the realization that I had no time to prepare briefly crossed my mind.

"Jyushi," My voice was loud amidst the hissing, snapping the albino naga's attention back to me, "I need to talk to you."

"Alone."

"No, with Kara and Choro here," I took a few steps forward, motioning towards the wide open space between us, "They need to hear what I have to say, too."

A brief look of hurt crossed Jyushi's face before he slowly climbed down the tree, gathering himself in front of me and meeting my eyes. I could feel Kara and Choro close by, but whatever had happened between the three nagas didn't seem to be affecting Jyushi anymore.

"Why are you here, (y/n)? I waited all night for you to come back home," A small frown creased his lips downward.

"I slept here because I wanted to give you time to cool down from what happened over the past few days," I was honest, deciding it best to just rip the proverbial band-aid off the wound, "I felt safer here."

A flurry of emotions crossed Jyushi's face, twisting the sad look into anger, confusion, and distrust before settling on understanding.

"Because of what I did?"

"Because of what you did to Kara, and what you've been telling your brothers about me."

"Was it...not right?" His orange eyes locked onto mine, the searching deep within them similar to a child wanting to know what they did wrong.

"No, it wasn't," I held his gaze, my own eyes firm, "I know that you don't like it, but I love

all

of you. I don't want to be kept away from your brothers without me telling you to do so, and it really hurt my heart when Kara showed me what you did to him. Do you know why he was approaching my home?"

"Because he wanted to mate with you," Jyushi's voice tensed up, the surge of energy rippling through his body as he flexed his shoulders and tail, his eyes locked onto the viper naga.

"Jyushi," I stated his name sharply, forcing him to look at me by sidestepping between the two nagas, "Kara had helped create a safe place for me to go when my scent becomes overwhelming for you all, and he simply wanted to surprise me with the news."

"But--" The stern look in his eyes completely fell away, as if his argument had no more leg to stand on.

"You're

not

my bodyguard, Jyushi!"

My own frustrated yell startled me as Jyushi pulled away slightly, his eyes wide in surprise.

"I'm going to be your mate in due time. That goes for your brothers, too. I agreed to be shared between you, but you're the only one that seems to have a different idea of what's going to happen."

"

I found you first!

" His voice raised in volume, shouting at me as frustration settled in his expression, "It's not fair that I

have

to share you with my brothers! They didn't do anything for you when you needed it, and only wanted to hurt you!"

I could feel Kara and Choro tense up behind me, their distaste palpable. Without looking behind me, I tried to give them some kind of sign that I was okay.

"

All

of you have hurt me in some way."

Jyushi stilled instantly, his widening eyes realizing the phrasing of what I said, "What...did I do?"

"You broke a promise," My voice softened, "You let me fall."

"I..." His hands pressed against his face, his voice straining as he curled down to the ground, "I tried to catch you, (y/n)..."

"I know you did, Jyushi," Giving a reassuring glance to the two nagas behind me, I crouched next to Jyushi and placed a hand on his back. I felt

his skin flinch from the touch, "But I'm not mad at you about that. I'm willing to forgive that because you made up for it by making sure I was safe the rest of the flight over here."

Jyushi barely lowered his fingers from over his eyes, revealing a few tears trailing down his cheeks.

"Do you know why I'm mad at you, Jyushi?"

"Because I'm being selfish."

"Because you're keeping me from five other people that I love," I nodded gently, making it clear to him, "I know that you're strong enough to keep me safe, but so are the others. Please don't try to take the burden of that all by yourself, okay?"

"My strength is all I have."

"No, it's not. You're caring and cautious around me," I moved a little closer, pressing my left hip against his outer coil, "You're protective of your brothers, especially when those hunters were here. Kara told me that you took on a hunter all by yourself to keep Ichi safe."

Jyushi shifted his gaze to focus on Kara, his tongue flicking in and out quickly before looking back at me. I returned the look with a smile.

"I'm sorry," The words were soft, his focus dropping a little before looking back up, "I'm sorry, (y/n). I really love you and I want to make sure that you're taken care of, but since I felt like no one else could do that...I pushed everyone else away. I didn't know that it would hurt you, or make you upset with me."

Jyushi leaned against me a little, his muscles flexing along my side as he adjusted his position so he wouldn't crush me.

"I want you to make me a promise that you can never ever break."

"What is it?" The happy tone slowly crept back into Jyushi's voice.

"Promise that you'll never keep me to yourself, okay?"

"I promise," He pressed his cheek against mine, wrapping his arms around my shoulders while rubbing our cheeks together. The light purring started to roll within his chest as I looked over at Kara and Choro with a questioning look of 'did I do okay'.

They both appeared to be much more at ease than five minutes ago.

With Jyushi agreeing to go back to his territory peacefully, I offered my farewells to Choro and Kara before giving them each a kiss, thanking Choro for his watchful presence and wishing Kara a fast recovery while promising to use what he taught me.

I started on my own back to where I had made my home in Jyushi's territory, carefully picking my way through Kara's jungle before I spotted the large fields through the trees. When I managed to get to the borders of Kara's and Oso's territories, I locked eyes with a pair of red-and-black hues.

"Care to walk and talk?"

My Letter To You, the Reader

Good morning, afternoon, or evening, Reader!

My username is Choose_The_Adventure and I just wanted to take some time aside today to thank you for reading 'Subject To Study'. This story grew so much bigger than I ever thought possible, and I only have you to thank for its popularity.

While my follower base has grown a little (starting at around 80 followers when this was first published), I wanted to give

you

the shout-out that you deserve for reading and re-reading this story as I've written it, boosting the view count up to (and beyond) 41,000! The comments that were left throughout the story were all read and taken to heart, from the compliments and absolute adoration of the characters to the discrepancies and faults that were pointed out to me.

I never would have gotten this far if it wasn't for your constant support: the votes, the views, the readers that were interested enough to put this into a Reading List, and the silent readers that just read on without leaving any comment or vote (this letter is for you, too!).

This being said, I do have some sad news to deliver.

'Subject To Study' will end at Chapter 55.

I will be completely removing the previous Author Note upon the story's completion, as well as editing the last half of the story, before publishing the sequel 'Subject To Study Extended' (interesting title, I know). While I love writing about my Naga!Matsus, there's a time and place to leave a story without stretching it too thin, and Chapter 55 is that place. It will be a much longer chapter than normal, as I want to give a few things a proper conclusion, but it will be the final chapter.

I've stated many times on my profile, but since about 85% of my readers are not followers, I will state it again here.

Please do not ask for updates or a continuation of 'Subject To Study'.

I am human just like you, and cannot put too much on my plate or I become overstrained. With college back in swing, I'm currently working a full-time job while attending school as a part-time student. This demands 13 hours of my day. I understand that you're excited to read what I have to offer, but the truth of the matter is that I cannot spend my entire free time writing (as much as I would absolutely love to).

I have no idea when Chapter 55 will be ready for you to read it. It could be a few days or it could be a few weeks. It absolutely depends on the demands that work and school are making of me, so please be patient with me.

I wanted to get this to you before my class starts today. If you feel deprived of my writing, I have four other stories that are published (three of which are completed) in my series 'One More Time', with the reader and the Matsuno brothers in different situations/scenarios as the central focus. I also have a Reader Request-oriented story collection called 'Sixfold Adventures' (requests are closed, currently) and a Halloween special that will update yearly titled 'When Ghosts Whisper'.

All of my stories are Osomatsu-san related, so don't worry about missing the characters that I've managed to bring to life through this book.

I appreciate you so much, Reader, and know that I will continue to write about Osomatsu-san for a long while yet.

P.S. The corn snake is my co-creator, Jupiter. He's 8 months old today.

Chapter 55

Oso's relaxed position caught me off-guard, partially expecting him to be extra attentive to his surroundings since Jyushi had passed this way not too long ago.

The oldest naga let his hands and arms hang freely by his side, the familiar smirk resting on his lips as he waited for my answer to his question. I quickly looked him over before noticing that there were no new wounds or marks on his skin, telling me that he had let Jyushi pass without a fuss.

"Where would this walk end up?" I slightly raised an eyebrow, still a little tense from the discussion about an hour ago.

"Wherever you want it to go," He held out his right hand to me, the smirk shifting into a smile, "I could also just be quiet and escort you directly to Jyushi's territory, because I know that's where you're going."

"No," I took his hand while shaking my head, "You don't need to be quiet. It's just...I still have a debt with you last I checked."

"Ah, that."

Oso released my hand after gently tugging me forward to walk next to him, his coils shifting as he moved alongside me. There was a long moment of silence between us as we walked, the long grass soothing to listen to with the morning breeze blowing through it.

"I'm not holding any of my grudges against you anymore."

"But you said--"

"It was wrong of me to put all of the pressure onto you, but I didn't think there was any other option," He raised a hand to brush his bangs away from his eyes, focusing on me after taking a breath, "I used you in any way that I

could, knowing how you felt about me through your scent and taunting you to make sure that you did as you were told."

I stopped walking as he did, looking right at him without flinching at his words.

"You've done much more than I ever thought you would, and it's only been recently that I fully realize that you were

never

like the other humans that came here before. You never approached us with an ulterior motive or false words, blindly hoping that we'd follow your every whim because you had 'gained our trust'," Oso closed his eyes for a brief moment, opening them and shifting his head up to look at the sky, "Because of you, we were taken from our home...but also because of you, we're back on our island and alive. I don't have any words that could describe what it felt like to crawl on this grass again, to leave that flying machine and know that it'll be the last time I'd see that contraption ever again.

"I know you've said that you were interested in being our shared mate, but I don't feel like I deserve anything from you, especially after everything I've done. The pain of fear, the terror of death..." He sucked in a breath between his teeth, the spaces where his fangs would fold down made obvious as his top lip pulled back a little, "I've waited a few days to tell you this, since you were busy with...other things...but I don't want you to become my mate."

My heart thudded in my chest as Oso slightly pulled away from me, a light blush rising in his cheeks while I took a step towards him, a distraught look on my face.

"Oso--!"

"I mean it, (y/n)!" He backed away from my outstretched hand, my fingertips missing the scales on his upper arms as he twisted out of my reach, "Don't make me regret this."

"You're the one who looks like he regrets what he's said!" I took wide steps to catch him, wrapping my arms around his chest and pressing my cheek into his shoulder, "I know you can tell how I'm feeling, how fast my heart is racing...If you really don't want me as your mate, then push me away yourself."

I waited for Oso to lower his arms, tensing for the motion that would shove me back and out of reach.

It never came.

Slowly looking up, my colored hues met his red-and-black gaze, uncertainty flooding his eyes as he continued to stare down at me.

"Are you sure about this? What if I'm just bluffing and messing around with you again to try and sway you back to my side?"

"If you were trying to mess with my emotions, you would've already made sure that I knew my position in regards to you," I stuck out my tongue playfully, almost laughing as he responded with his own forked tongue slipping out between his lips, "I'd like to think that I've known you for long enough that I can tell when you're being serious and when you're trying to get me mad at you."

"And how can you tell?"

"Your eyes."

He raised an eyebrow in uncertainty as his arms slowly wrapped around my hips, fully enveloping me in a loose hug.

"You have this cold look in your eyes that makes me think I did something wrong," I clarified as I lay my head on his shoulder, feeling him breathe, "But now I'm starting to think that the look is actually directed to

yourself

."

We stood there in silence, only the wind keeping us company as the sun started to rise higher into the noon sky. I felt his skin start to warm up a little more as we stood still, the sun's heat being absorbed by his scales and offering his body the necessary heat it needed to function.

"(Y/n)."

The tone of Oso's voice caught my attention immediately, making me look back up at him.

"Yes...?"

"You never cease to amaze me," He released me from the hug as the light blush spread across his face and rested on his ears, "Now I think you're too good for

any

of us."

"Pfft, don't say that," I playfully laughed as my hand gently tapped against his chest, "Maybe

I'm

the one that's trying to woo you into doing my bidding."

"Doubtful," The familiar smirk was back in full force, his dual colors confident as he looked down at me, "You may be smart, but you're not

that

smart."

"I'm smart enough to outwit the human that ordered your capture."

"And who was it that warned you to find a way out quickly?" One of his eyes closed slightly, a skeptical look washing over Oso's face as his arms folded over his chest.

"...you," I rolled my eyes.

"You can be the smart human, but I'm the intelligent naga."

I gasped as I felt one of Oso's coils press against my back, pushing me into him before one of his hands tilted my head upwards, sealing my lips in a deep kiss before I could reprimand him. Oso held the position for a long time before pulling away slightly, his eyes searching my face for something as I caught my breath from the sudden show of affection. He seemed to find whatever he was looking for, humming lightly as he gave me another soft kiss on the cheek.

"Let me escort you home before I'm tempted to do more."

"Are you sure that I can't help?"

Jyushi looked up at me with uncertainty on his face, peering in through the finished doorway of my home in his territory. Only able to enter up to his waist, his orange eyes were a stark contrast with the surrounding greenery and dirt, the grass partially stomped down as I had been moving back and forth over the last few days.

"I don't want you knocking anything over or tearing something down, Jyushi," I commented as I struggled with lashing some of the upper walls against the thick tree canopy that served as my roof, "My home is too small for you to fit in, so I have to do it myself. Besides--"

I winced as I felt the stone knife drag across the back of my hand, jumping loose from the bark that I had tried to cut away to create a notch for the rope.

"(Y/n)?" Jyushi's voice raised in pitch, panic setting in as he ducked down to the floor while trying to wedge himself further into the doorway.

"I'm fine, Jyushi," I quickly turned, showing the slice that ran across the majority of the back of my hand, "Nothing vital was hit, so just stay out

there."

"I can go get Todo. He's small enough to get in there and help," The reticulated naga backed out of the doorway, the strong limbs of the trees slightly bent from his efforts to enter.

"Jyushi, no!" I quickly climbed down from my position, abandoning the attempt to finish my home in order to stop Jyushi from crossing the entire island because he couldn't help me, "Look, let's just make the paste to stop the bleeding, okay?"

Jyushi turned around from his intended path, his eyes fixating on my hand before looking up at me, "But you're going to need help after that."

"I can finish it on my own later. What you

can

do to help is to gather the plants I need to stop this," Pointing towards the spring that I used to bathe, I gave him a gentle smile, "Meet me by the spring and we'll make it together."

The wide smile was back on Jyushi's face, "Okay!"

With a small flourish, the reticulated naga took off deeper into his territory and left me alone for the moment. I took in a breath and looked back to my nearly completed home, a frustrated frown pulling at my lips as I thought about taking the small respite to finish the last bit of lashing needed to secure it all together.

Turning away from it, I began making my way towards the spring, my hand starting to hurt more and more with each heartbeat.

I yelped in pain as Jyushi held my injured hand, his tail looped behind me to offer support as I leaned against it. His partially cold hands gently turned my own, focused on the cut that didn't seem like a huge deal at first...but that was before I had washed the coagulating blood off.

"Sorry, (y/n)..." Jyushi's tail stiffened behind me as I rested my head against the top most part of the coil, his orange eyes glancing up at me.

"It's nothing that you're doing, Jyushi...promise," I stated through gritted teeth as the paste he had smeared onto the washed cut burned like fire. I had made the same stuff that Kara taught me to make when I needed to slow the bleeding of a wound, following his directions exactly. He seemed to have forgotten to tell me that this paste

really

hurt when it was applied.

Jyushi didn't reply, shifting his position to lay next to me before rubbing his cheek against mine in an attempt to help soothe my pain. The paste needed to sit and harden before I could do anything more with it, and with that process taking almost an hour, I was stuck here by the spring with little to no use from the hand with the cut.

I closed my eyes and moved to rest my hand on a knee, feeling Jyushi quickly take my hand and linked his fingers with mine.

"You're not going to die, are you?" Jyushi still sounded a little nervous, his breathing rapid compared to his usual state.

"I'm not planning on dying from a small cut," I barely shook my head.

"(Y/n), that's

not

a small cut..." His index finger lightly traced around the drying paste, dancing near the outer edges of the back of my hand. I breathed out heavily through my nose, knowing that he was right.

The cut had looked superficial, but the blood hid the fact that the blade narrowly missed one of the larger veins, the blue vein wall easily visible from within the cut opening. The smaller veins had been cut, which was the reason why there was blood in the cut, but if I had sliced at the tree a little

bit harder then I would probably be in a medical emergency right now. The burning feeling had slowly dissipated into a cooling sensation, more than likely from the lemon balm leaves as the juices and aloe started to work their natural magic.

"Is it true that you're thinking of creating a den in each of our territories?" Jyushi quietly asked, his voice rumbling against my shoulder as he leaned against me.

I partially frowned, knowing that I couldn't really keep a secret on the island, not when the brothers were in constant contact with each other. Opening my eyes, I looked over to him and met his curious gaze.

"It's true that I'm thinking of making a place for me to live in each territory, as it would give me a chance to live in the different biomes that your island offers. It would also give me the chance to get to know your brothers better."

"Would you come back here?" I immediately picked up the hidden question that Jyushi was trying to ask.

"I would rotate between my homes, visiting everyone often throughout the days," I nodded, "The new homes would be lived in and I'd use the den that Kara, Oso, and Choro made on the overlook for when my scent becomes too much. I'd have to figure out a schedule that would work with everyone, but it's my plan to not have a set home...you know...in case Calmine decides to come back."

My voice softened, "I know it's still a possibility, but I'd rather give the hunters a good distraction while you all take care of them."

"You mean, those mean humans could come back?"

"There's always that chance. Whether it's Calmine's men or not is the factor here."

"If they're good humans, then are we able to interact with them?" Jyushi's tongue quickly flicked out as he looked towards Choro's territory.

"That really depends. Since the only landing site I've used is in Choro's area, we're going to have to rely on his instincts about the humans. I'd like to think that if they're good, I'll be called to talk with them before you nagas do anything to them. However, if they're bad, then I'll hide out wherever I am and let you guys take care of them."

Jyushi's face suddenly became unsure, the look nearly unsettling on the reticulated naga.

"Jyushi?"

"Ah, it's nothing," He quickly waved a hand in front of his face dismissively, partially shaking his head from side to side at the same time, "Just lost in thought."

"Is it about the last group that came here?" I watched carefully as his pupils swelled, nearly encompassing his entire eye, as he lifted a hand to rest over the thin line that his lips pulled into. Closing my eyes, I turned away and glanced towards the calm waters of the spring, "You don't need to tell me anything...I have an inkling as to what really happened, and why I needed to move the helicopter myself."

Jyushi's voice dipped low in sorrow, "You're not mad, are you, (y/n)?"

His question partially confirmed what I thought had happened, that the group of hunters had been violently dispatched by the brothers. As to who did what, I didn't have a clue...but with three brothers wielding venom and the other three being a lot stronger than a human, I could put together that the corpses had already been removed from the island so I didn't stumble onto their bloated, twisted, or necrotic cadavers by accident.

"No, I'm not mad," I gently rubbed the back of my good hand against his scales, feeling the large muscles underneath his skin flex and contort at my touch, "I could never be mad at you all for defending your home from a threat."

Jyushi hummed happily and pressed his cheek against mine again, rubbing it in circles as his tail slightly flexed against me.

The jungle around me was quiet as I walked through the dense underbrush, remaining cautious of smaller creatures that could still hurt me. Just because I was in a relationship with the nagas that lived on the island didn't mean that I was also at peace with every living creature on it.

"Choro?" I called out to the surrounding trees, my injured hand safely wrapped in the remaining gauze from my first-aid kit. The cut had slightly closed throughout the multiple paste applications over the last few days, but the bulging vein could still be seen through the opening. I was too scared to leave it exposed with just the hardened paste as a shield from the elements.

The feeling of being watched creeped up my back, making me look up to the trees behind me, "Are you there?"

Without one of the nagas next to me, and knowing that I was the only human on the island, the jungle took on a haunted feel. I had never felt like this when I first landed, but being alone on the island was definitely a different feeling.

The nagas had their own respective defensive tactics and abilities, their immune systems enough to keep them alive here. I was still prone to a lot of things that were hiding in the shadows, or drifting around on the air molecules.

"(Y/n)?" Choro's voice was faint, sounding in the direction that I was walking. It seemed like he was still pretty far away.

"Over here--!" My voice cut off as I fell through the ground, my feet giving way when I stepped on a large pocket of air underneath the dirt. I brought my arms over my head as I tumbled down the sloped opening, rolling to a stop as clumps of dirt fell on top of me.

Choro's voice was much further away now, barely heard through the small opening that I created.

Groaning and clutching my wounded hand close, I slowly looked above me to see the light streaming in through the opening, revealing a little bit of the packed dirt that created the fragile looking ceiling above me. The walls appeared to have been formed naturally, possibly from washing away with the excess rainwater that I was warned about by Oso, or just eroding over time as the natural pocket of air grew into a potential sinkhole. The small sinkhole was just large enough to fit me, but the depth was what scared me the most.

The opening that I had created was almost ten meters above me, the light exposing the angled path that I had rolled down.

"Choro!" I shouted at the top of my lungs, cupping my hands around my mouth to try and make the sound even louder through a makeshift megaphone, "Choro, I'm down here!"

A nervous glance around the small cave-in area only warned me that there were no other ways out of here, meaning I had to try and make the steep climb up loose dirt and earth if I wanted to get out.

If the opening was my size, then the only naga that could really fit through the opening was Todo. His serpentine body was relatively the same size as his hips, while the others' tails flared out a little.

"Choro!!" Panic clawed its way into my voice, the light from the entrance being blocked by something shifting around above me before I saw the green mamba naga duck his head into the hole, "Down here, Choro!"

"(Y/n), are you all right? Any injuries?" Choro looked around the area, slightly frowning more as he seemed to come to the same conclusion as me: he wasn't going to be able to fit inside safely.

"No, nothing that I can feel," I tried to take a few steps back as some dirt fell from the sloped ceiling, "Don't come down here...I could get buried alive."

"I can sense that," His lips twisted into a frustrated scowl, "I'd say 'wait here', but that's all you can really do for now...I'll be back. Don't touch

anything."

I gave a nod as he lifted himself out of the hole, straining my ears to hear him crawl away to either solve this himself somehow or to get Todo. If it was the latter, then I'd be waiting for quite a while, especially since Todo's territory was almost directly across the island from Choro's area.

Cradling my injured hand against my chest, I tried to gingerly crawl up the slope leading to the hole I created, the dirt shifting slightly underneath my other hand and boots as I made some small progress. My fingers pressed into the dirt and I felt a large root, gripping onto it tightly as a makeshift hand hold while getting my feet under me to continue upwards.

A snapping sound reached my ears before I lost my grip on the root, slipping back down a few feet before falling into a roll, hitting the ground hard as more dirt fell on top of me.

"Dammit..." I raised my clenched hand, still holding onto some of the roots that had broken from my shifting weight, before looking towards the slope and feeling my heart plummet into my stomach, "Come on...really?"

The slope had grown steeper as some of the footing that I had used came loose from my fall, making the climb much harder than it originally was.

"(Y/n), are you still alive?" Choro's voice called out before he bent into the opening again, looking down at my dirt-covered self, "Can you still use your hands?"

"Only one of them right now," I answered as I stood up, brushing the dirt off and looking up towards his hard-to-see dark green hues, "I don't want to use the other since it's still injured from a few days ago."

"Okay," Choro nodded, his green hair swaying with the movement, "I'm going to lower some vines. Grab what you're able to and I'll hoist you out of there."

"Sounds good."

I only had to wait for a few seconds before a large twisting mess of vines slid down through the hole, dropping onto the steep dirt slope before stopping a few feet from me. Without waiting for further instruction, I wrapped some of the vines around my good arm before gripping onto the large vine in the middle, my fingernails partially digging into its flesh. A few moments later, I felt myself lifted from the sinkhole and into open air, a pair of arms wrapping around me as I rose into the trees.

"There..." Choro's relieved voice rumbled against my chest, one of his hands brushing against my face to clear away the dirt smears, "Let's stay in the trees this time, okay?"

I clung to him as he held me close, the panic from the fall slipping away as he gently held me, "Yeah, that's fine..."

"Why didn't you stay where Jyushi told you to wait for me?" His head pulled away, looking at me with partially hurt eyes.

"When he said that your territory was unstable near his, I didn't expect it to be

that

unstable," I closed my eyes as Choro's thumb rubbed the skin high on my left cheek, brushing away more dirt, "I promise that I'll stay put next time."

"I'd like it if there

was

a next time, so please follow our instructions. We give them to keep you safe, not to smother you," Choro sounded chiding but a small smile rested on his lips, "You had wanted to see the rest of my territory, so I guess that means stopping at one of the springs for a bath?"

"If I do take a bath, I'll need more paste for my hand," Barely lifting my gauze-wrapped hand, I gave myself a look over, "I'd have to shake off my

clothes, but I think I'm okay for now. As long as I don't fall into any more sinkholes, I won't need one immediately."

"Considering I'm carrying you the rest of the time, you won't be falling down any holes soon," His left eye closed in a wink, reaching above me and began the tour of his entire territory.

Ichi simply stared at me as I emerged from the small jungle pass to the northeast of the mountain range, barely lifting his head up from his loose coils as he soaked in the early morning sun. His dark eyes regarded my physical appearance with scrutiny, his focus narrowing in on the dirtied gauze wrapped around my injured hand before switching to the massive welt on the side of my neck. Without saying a word, Ichi turned his head away and folded his arms across a section of his tail before resting his head against it.

"I know that posture, Ichi," I let out a silent sigh as I walked towards the lavender corn naga, kneeling on the rocky ground, "Talk to me."

"There's nothing to talk about."

"Sure there is. I can already tell that you've come to a conclusion about the welt without asking me what it's from," I carefully reached out and ran a few fingers through his hair, my eyes widening in surprise as he leaned into the light touch before pushing my whole hand against him, "Would you like to know how it actually happened?"

"From a reaction to a plant that you brushed by while going through Choro's territory," Ichi's eyes met mine with a flat emotion swirling in the dark color, "I know that it's not from mating."

I paused in rubbing his head, taken a little off-guard by the precision of his answer, "Did Choro tell everyone?"

"Like a frantic child."

"Ah," I laughed a little, my fingers working through some knots in his hair before scratching lightly against his scalp, "Then you're right. I guess there is nothing to talk about."

Ichi closed his eyes and relaxed as I continued to rub his head, "Why are you wandering around the island anyway? I thought you were only looking at the places that you could live in."

"Last I checked, that included your territory."

"But there's just earth and rocks here, nothing that would make a suitable living place for a human," He barely opened his right eye to glance at me, confusion starting to settle over his features.

"I know that your territory doesn't have the trees or wilderness that the other parts of the island do, but that doesn't mean there isn't a place that I could use as a home," Lifting my hand from his head, I offered a smile as Ichi looked over at me, "I'd like to see what there is before I conclude that I can't live here."

The lavender corn naga was silent for a few moments before gathering his coils underneath him, "Then I'll show you what are some of the more hospitable places. Don't cry to me if you can't use them."

"I've already cried in front of you once," I offered a smile before he turned away, following his lead, "I don't plan on doing it again."

I cautiously looked around the cave Ichi led me to, the other locations either too small for me to crawl into or too large to really call a 'hiding place'. The cave had an opening that I needed to squeeze into, but once I was past that, the cavern really opened up into a livable space for someone my size. It would be hard getting materials in to create a bed or fashion some kind of space for clothes, but I would probably be able to ask Ichi for help on widening the opening just a little bit. I liked the protection that the slim opening offered and didn't want to completely ruin that.

"Another no?" Ichi asked from outside the cave, sounding disappointed without me giving me any kind of feedback.

"Actually, I think this will work," I responded, looking at the high ceiling and seeing a few openings that let in natural light, "I'd have to gather some supplies from Todo's and Choro's territory to create a comfortable bed, but I think this'll work for me."

"...really?"

"Yeah, really," I squeezed back out through the opening, patting myself down before straightening out my clothes, "It's far enough away from the ocean that I won't need to worry about water rot on the foliage I'll use, and there's a few small springs nearby that I can get fresh water from. The only thing I'd need to be careful of is bringing enough food with me so I don't starve myself accidentally while staying here."

"If it's food you need, I can show you an oasis nearby," Ichi straightened up from his leaning position against the outside cave wall, "It's mostly plants, but I can show you where to get some meat...if you're able to catch it."

"Rabbits and mice?"

"Hares, mainly," He nodded towards the ocean, "There's a breeding ground that I don't touch that way. I mainly pick off the old and sick in the surrounding area that can't really escape without help, but I also don't like moving very far on a hunt."

"Speaking of moving..." I slowly turned my focus towards Ichi, watching as he switched his gaze back to me, "What the hell was that a week ago?"

His eyes shifted from a neutral look to a confused expression.

"It was like you had appeared from thin air when I was asking to pass through your territory," I recalled the memory, looking over the boulder that I had climbed on to see nothing there. When I alerted Ichi of what my intentions were, he was suddenly behind me without looking like he just moved, "Can you...hide from your prey?"

Ichi suddenly looked uncomfortable, his dark eyes darting away from my face as if suddenly interested in something to his left.

"Ichi."

The naga's skin partially flinched as I lightly rested a hand on his right shoulder, his focus staying away from me.

"Ichi," I stated his name more firmly, watching as Ichi slowly looked back towards me, a small blush spread across his cheeks, "I'm not going to tell the others about it, all right? I just wanted to know if that was your defensive ability."

His face contorted with uncertainty before giving a slight nod, "Yes, it's what I'm gifted with: hiding from those that don't have our extra senses. Since my brothers can always pick out my scent no matter where I am, it doesn't work on them and I keep it hidden...it's a dumb ability."

"I don't think it's dumb," I shook my head, dropping my hand from his shoulder, "When you revealed your location to me that day, it scared me. I think it's a wonderful ambush ability that allows your prey to get close to you without even knowing you're there, letting you strike out and grab them."

"You...don't?" Ichi's gaze met mine cautiously, "You're not going to call me lazy for just sitting around while waiting for food to pass by?"

"Lemme guess -- Oso said that?" I barely raised an eyebrow, Ichi's partial nod all the confirmation I needed, "There are some humans that think snakes are the laziest creatures on the planet, just sitting around under the sun and waiting for food to just waltz by...but not me."

My thoughts were interrupted by a pair of arms wrapping around my waist, shocking me from speaking as I had thought Ichi was walking beside me. The familiar lavender-colored hair appeared to the rightmost side of my vision, Ichi rested his head on my right shoulder while his arms tightened a little around my waist, my back held against his chest.

"Did I say something you liked?" I hummed a laugh as the naga held me close, the show of affection rare from Ichi.

"You should already know the answer to that, (y/n)," His voice was soft against my ear. Ichi held me for a moment longer before releasing me, standing to his full height while beckoning me to follow him, "I'll show you the hare breeding ground...but promise not to wander too far from me. They'll sense you otherwise."

"These should be safe to eat," Todo picked a bright red berry cluster from a small bush close to the ground, popping a few into his mouth and chewing for a little bit before giving the 'okay' symbol with his hand, finishing what was left in his mouth before talking, "They're a little grainy, but should be enough to get you by."

"You know you don't have to do this, Todo," I picked some of the berries from the same bush he indicated, mentally cataloging what the bush looked like as I nibbled on a few berries, tasting the graininess he warned about but enjoyed the flavor a little more than I guessed.

"No, I don't. That's why you

should

be thanking me for taking some time out of my day to help you," The pink-dotted naga scoffed, moving on towards another tree that was flowering with white little buds and black berry clusters, "You need to avoid these. While they do look appealing, they're rather poisonous."

"I'm guessing you got hungry and tried them?"

"Not at all! Just--" Todo's dark copper eyes met mine before lowering, a light blush spreading across his cheeks, "...maybe a little bit."

"Then I'll avoid those," A knowing smile rested on my lips as he turned away, "Does everything in your territory grow everywhere else on the island?"

"I don't know, but you're welcome to take some sproutlings and try to grow them wherever they'll take. Since Jyushi's and my territories are similar, you'll probably have the best luck with his," The naga looked back at me while I neared him, "There are other types of plants that would probably have more success in Oso's and Ichi's areas, but you'll need to ask them if you can plant something there. I don't think they don't like their area being changed too much without their knowledge."

"I'll keep that in mind," I looked up towards the canopy smothering the afternoon sun, "You really can't tell what time it is here, can you?"

"I like the dark that the trees provide," His hand lightly brushed against mine, pulling away as he moved deeper into his territory, "It makes me harder to see when I'm hunting."

"Speaking of harder to see," I narrowed my eyes as I focused on Todo, watching as he slowly turned towards me with a look of warning clearly written on his face, "We need to make one thing clear between us."

His copper eyes narrowed, the dim sunlight catching the amber flecks deep within the color, as his taut lips thinned into a frown. I quickly shifted my focus to his nose, avoiding looking directly into his eyes.

"Your ability scares me."

"I

know

it does," His response was quick, "You don't think I've learned my lesson already? I'm not going to use it on you."

"That's not my point," I dropped the harsh look I realized I was giving him, looking off towards my right as I relaxed my stance, "What I was meaning to say was that...I want you to know that, while I do find your ability suddenly being used on me is scary..."

I closed my eyes tightly before continuing.

"Maybe it would help me calm down in stressful situations, especially when -- or if -- Calmine's men come back and I need to hide. I don't want my fear distracting you or your brothers from protecting the island, especially when I'm in hiding."

Todo stared at me, the frown loosening a little as his mind seemed to connect the dots that I was trying to set up.

"So, you're saying that you'd

want

me to use my charm on you to...calm you down in a scary situation?"

I gave a small nod, hearing him give a huff of amusement before it rolled into laughter. Todo quickly covered his mouth with a hand, guffawing through his fingers until the fit slowly died down into a sigh. His copper eyes gave me a long lookover before speaking.

"I think I'm going to enjoy our time together, (y/n). You're much more interesting than I thought you were."

"My beautiful (y/n), you're a mess!" Kara dropped the large bundle of branches in his arms when he saw me push through the foliage near his territory border, rushing to my side and gently taking my beaten up hands, "What have you been through?"

"Nothing that killed her, obviously," Todo scoffed beside me, drawing his older brother's attention in surprise, "Just a few pitfalls that she accidentally discovered."

"Yeah,

accidentally

," I rolled my eyes, knowing that the first fall was the only one I could call an accident. The other two times had been for Todo's amusement as he

directed me toward each one. I caught on after that and demanded that either he give me the safe directions so I could walk on my own, or he would carry me the rest of the way here.

"Ah, (y/n)..." Kara shifted his hands up my arms to my shoulders, his bright copper eyes carefully looking over my face before rubbing some dirt away from my forehead, "There's a spring nearby that we can clean you off at."

"Hey, wait," Todo flinched a little before rushing towards Kara, "You can't give her a bath! She doesn't like to be watched."

I pressed the back of my uninjured hand to my lips, stifling a snort as Kara looked between Todo and I, confusion prevalent on his face.

"I wasn't going to watch, Todo," Kara huffed, lowering his hands from me as I tried to recover from Todo's protective outburst, "I had only meant that I would take care of her clothing while she washed off herself, since she doesn't have any other clothes to wear at the moment without trekking back to Jyushi's territory."

Todo tilted his head a little, his eyes narrowing at his older brother before sighing.

"Guys, it's okay," I intervened, raising my hands to my head level before lowering them to my waist, "I could use a bath after the adventures I've had the past few days. I'll give you my clothes to wash, but you need to promise to not watch me bathe...I'm still not used to being observed doing that."

"Of course I wouldn't watch you," Kara gave me a wide smile before motioning in the direction of a spring that was supposedly close by, "Todo's mistake was a lesson for all of us."

"Did you want me to come with, (y/n)?" The youngest naga asked cautiously, not making a move to follow. I turned to face him, hearing Kara continue without me for a few moments before stopping.

"Todo, you've done what I've asked. Now that I'm in Kara's territory, and he was here to meet us, I'm going to be okay," I offered a confident smile,

watching as Todo switched his focus from me to Kara, "If something happens and I need your help, I'll find a way to call for you."

"Just...be careful," Todo's eyes hardened as he pointed a finger towards his teeth, "Kara gets

nippy

when he's excited."

"No, I don't!" Kara called out, his tone hurt from the accusation.

"I'll be careful, Todo," Waving farewell as Todo turned away and ducked into the jungle near his territory, I lowered my arm back to my side as I looked towards Kara, seeing the slight frown resting on his lips.

"You know that I'm not going to hurt you...right?"

"I know, but it's okay for me to reassure the others that it won't happen," I moved to stand next to him, brushing the back of my good hand against his, "Now...about that bath."

Breaking the surface of the shallow spring, I ran my fingers through my hair to work out all of the knots and tangles, swimming over to the side to find a comfortable place to sit while working on my hair. The length had definitely grown out since I first landed on the island, but I'd need to find some kind of proper cutting tool if I ever wanted to cut it back to its original length.

"(Y/n)," Kara's voice cautiously called out from nearby, drawing my attention towards some thicker bushes at my back, "Your clothes are rinsed out, and I have more of that paste ready to be used when the injury is dry."

I glanced down to my hand, the cut healing up nicely but still revealing the fragile wall of the large vein along with some meat and muscle within my hand.

"Thanks, Kara. I'm almost done," I called back, shaking my head from side to side to adjust how my hair sat on my back. My undergarments acted like

an impromptu bathing suit, letting Kara rinse out my shirt, pants, and socks. The only thing I really wish I had was the towel, but I didn't want Kara making the trek through Oso's territory to get it.

"Since the sun is starting to go down, did you want to try and find a place to sleep here?"

"That would probably be for the best," I looked up at the canopy to see the sun starting to dip low on the horizon. I had been away from my home in Jyushi's territory for nearly five days, going through each brother's territory to find suitable places that I'd be able to stay at. Kara's was supposed to be the last stop, and he had been gathering fallen and dead branches for me to use when he saw me.

Six brothers. Six homes that I could live in, with one reserved for emergencies when my body started to ovulate again. I knew that I wouldn't be able to make it up there in time for whenever it happened on my own, and each brother had promised that they'd warn me when my scent was growing in potency.

"Did you hear me?" Kara's voice shook me from my thoughts.

"Ah, shoot," I flinched, glancing back over my shoulder, "No, I didn't. What did you say, Kara?"

"Choro is saying that there's a storm coming from Jyushi's side of the island, and Oso's reporting the same storm," His words drew my attention towards the west, seeing the sky darken against the nearing sunset, "Jyushi is ensuring that your home stays standing, but that still leaves you."

"I don't have my home built in your territory yet," I pressed a few fingers against my bottom lip before looking back towards where Kara was speaking from, "I know this is a really rude thing to ask but, if your den can hold me, would you be willing to put up with me staying there until the storm is over?"

"Of course, I can," He sounded a little giddy, "I'll leave your clothes here, and call me when you're ready."

"Did Choro mention how fast the storm is coming in?"

"It's a larger storm," Kara paused for a few seconds, "Possibly when the sun sets."

"Oh, geez. That's not a lot of time!" I urged Kara to not look in my direction, scrambling out of the spring and squeezing whatever water I could out of my undergarments and hair, moving towards my clothes to find them completely dry and looking very clean. A slight smile rested on my lips before I tugged the clothes over my frame, fastening the pants but leaving the socks off.

"Everything okay?"

I pushed through the bushes to see Kara covering his eyes with his hands, his back facing the spring, "Yeah, you did a wonderful job, Kara."

"Ah, thanks," He lowered his hands and turned towards me, a smile growing on his lips, "My den is a little off of the ground, but very sturdy. It has outlasted several storms stronger than this one."

"Need me to do anything?" I held Kara's gaze as he moved closer to me, the viper naga stooping down a little and picking me up in his arms like I weighed nothing.

"Not at all," He shook his head, the teal-blue hair swaying a little with the motion, "Just hold on and let me know if you're in any discomfort."

I gently wrapped my arms around his neck as he positioned me on his back, my knees on either side of his hips. Within seconds, Kara had carried me into the trees, expertly navigating the invisible highway that he was comfortable travelling on as he moved from branch to branch, my additional weight not slowing him down at all.

Soon, we were within one of the larger trees in his part of the jungle, the hollow large enough to accommodate Kara and another smaller brother. I slid off of his back before Kara returned to the entrance, his intense focus on the incoming storm while his tongue waved lazily in the air.

The hollow was covered in Kara's shed skin, most of it pushed along the bottom edges of the hollow to create a more bowl-like shape. I could only guess that he preferred to not rest directly on the harsh live wood of the tree, running a hand over some of the shed to feel how pressed down it was. Picking a spot that seemed to be the most out-of-the-way within his den, I waited for him to speak as Kara's tail swung wide across the sloped den, the tip of his rust-colored tail brushing against my boot as I stuck it out to intercept the single limb.

"Any word?" I quietly asked in the silence, hearing the distant rumble of thunder.

"Oh, some of them are mad," Kara laughed a little, glancing back towards me, "Oso and Jyushi, mainly. But I think that's to be expected at this point."

"As long as everyone's safe during the storm, I don't really mind who I have to hunker down with," I looked from his copper hues to the tail, seeing it lightly wrap around the toe of my boot before letting go, the entire tail gathering underneath Kara as he stayed at his chosen post.

"I've told them that you'll be staying here the entire night, since the storm looks to last well into the night," He shifted his focus towards the outside world, the wind starting to pick up a little and tossing his bangs back, "Go ahead and sleep. I'll be here to keep you safe."

"Will your brothers be all right in this storm?" I brought my knees up to my chin, my face creased with worry. Kara moved over to me, his left hand rubbing against my left cheek before sliding down to my chin, tilting my head up to look at him.

"Compared to what we've all been through," Kara lowered and rested his lips against my forehead, kissing it softly, "This storm will be nothing more than a slight annoyance. We've lived through hell, and we'll keep going strong because of it."

Mature Sequel Published

I'm happy to say that the sequel is published! It is marked as a Mature story, so those under 18 cannot access it.

If you're under 18, there's no need to worry because you're not missing any plot. The sequel is just a glimpse of life now that (y/n) is settled on the island.

Search for 'Subject To Study Extended' if you're not able to follow this link:

https://www.wattpad.com/story/254343662-subject-to-study-extended-lemon-naga-brothers-x